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GREAT MEMBERS, GREAT CHURCHES:
ADAPTIVE CHANGE AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGY
IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

by
CHRISTOPHER JACOBSEN

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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2018

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ABSTRACT

*Great Members, Great Churches:
Adaptive Change and Missional Theology in the Local Church*

by

Christopher Jacobsen

An Action Research (AR) project focusing on congregational participation in ministries within the church and outside it. Theological lenses of Trinitarian theology, missional theology, and spiritual practices. Theoretical lenses of adaptive change theory, consumerism and social capital, and organizational theories of relationship, four-frame model, and open source model. Identifies adaptive challenges faced by a small Reformed Church in America church in northern New Jersey, with a strong emphasis on the tension between living busy lives and active participation in the ministry of the triune God. Reframes leadership through the lens of writing the church's story.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before starting this D.Min. program, I imagined the writing process to be one of sitting in a room and putting all of my knowledge down in a book. Having now completed the program, there are so many people that have played significant roles in bringing me to this point.

Many thanks to the congregation I am serving, named in this project as New Life Reformed Church, for giving me the time, resources, and prayer support needed to complete this program. Special thanks to the focus group and interview participants, and to the listening team that has walked alongside of me over the last four years. Many of the insights present in this thesis were born in conversations that we have had, and will no doubt continue to have.

Thank you to my colleagues in ministry in New Jersey who first walked the road of missional theology with me ten years ago: Jim, Jill, Randy, Emily, and Nathan. The basis of much of this thesis has its origins in our time together in the Journey program at Western Theological Seminary. Hopefully this project will help all of us continue to cultivate missional imagination in the church communities we are called to serve.

Thanks to Craig Van Gelder, Michael Binder, Dwight Zscheile, Scott Frederickson, and Terri Elton for the careful and inspiring teaching in this program. Each one of you have given not only important insight, but encouragement and friendship along the way. This project would not have been possible without your assistance.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RCA	Reformed Church in America
AR	Action Research
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

New Life Reformed Church¹ is experiencing a defining moment in its life as a church. For the first eight years of its existence, it drew large amounts of money out of an endowment to support a large staff—much larger than what would normally be considered appropriate for a congregation of its size. The leadership of the church has recently made a decision that the time has come for the church to rely less on its dwindling financial resources by cutting back significantly on the number of staff the church employs. For a congregation that has grown accustomed to having paid staff to carry out the ministries of the church, this raises important questions about how the church will be able to function in the years to come. What is the future of the church's ministry if it can no longer afford to pay someone to carry it out?

A research question emerged out of this context:

How might an Action Research intervention move congregation members towards playing an active role in the ministry of God, both within the church, and outside it?

This research measured the effects of five Action Research (AR) interventions on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the congregation, through the use of a baseline and an end line survey and focus groups following each intervention. My plan was for each of

¹ All names of churches and people in this thesis are pseudonyms, in order to protect the identities of those quoted.

the interventions to impact participants in a different way, with the cumulative effect being that the congregation overall was actively engaged in the ministry of the church, and that the members began to understand their entire lives as being participation in the ministry of God. Therefore, the interventions are independent variables and the effects of those interventions on members' engagement in ministry and their understanding of their lives as participation in God's ministry are dependent variables.

Intervening variables that were taken into account included participation in the ongoing discipleship ministries offered by the church, as well as the work and family obligations of the members that compete for time and attention. The church continued to offer Bible studies on a regular basis, which may have had an impact on the overall participation of the congregation. The overall culture of northern New Jersey is one in which people's schedules are typically filled, which undoubtedly has an impact on the church members' ability to be as actively involved as they might like to be. I anticipated that each person's employment status and family situation would impact their involvement, which I documented in the instruments as intervening variables. Finally, during the time of this research, there were decisions made about budget reductions that resulted in much of the church staff positions being eliminated. These changes became intervening variables in the course of the study.

This research topic and question are important to me and to the church because of the circumstances and trials the church is currently facing. The greater church in our part of New Jersey (and likely across much of the United States) is dealing with similar difficulties, where just a few of the members are doing the lion's share of the work while

most others are barely involved.² With overall church participation on the decline, people's ability to engage their world through the lens of faith is also declining, which means that important life matters and world issues are addressed without God ever entering into the conversation. For the church I serve, the response to the AR interventions may be an indicator of the potential for its future viability. For the larger church, I am hopeful this research might point toward a hopeful future.

I personally have been interested in this research topic ever since I was introduced to missional theology in my first call as the solo pastor of a fifty-member congregation in central New Jersey. That congregation had faced a crucible moment of its own prior to my arrival, nearly closing due to financial constraints, when the congregation stepped up and embraced its theology and identity in order that it might be more faithful to God's call in their lives. Some colleagues of mine invited me to study with them, along with members of our congregations, about how to change the way we thought about being the church, by focusing on God as the primary agent of mission in our midst. After serving that congregation for six years, I accepted a call to New Life, where I encountered a very different situation, one in which most of the ministry was accomplished by paid staff while congregation members were served as consumers. I want the members of New Life to have a deeper understanding of their own identity as participants in God's ministry, especially as the financial considerations of the church make that participation in ministry more critical.

There are other questions that relate to my research question that this research will attempt to address. What impact does adaptive leadership theory have on organizational

² Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xxi.

leadership in a volunteer-oriented church? Cultural change will be necessary in order for the church to adapt to a new situation. To what extent can Action Research (AR) have an impact on the culture of an organization—like a church—with deep historical roots? What role does the Holy Spirit play in this kind of cultural change? Later in this thesis I describe in greater detail the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses that inform this research question.

A Brief History of New Life

New Life Reformed Church was founded in 2008 as a result of the merger of two other congregations. In the merger, one of the church facilities was sold for approximately three million dollars, with the proceeds going to create an endowment which would help to support the ministry of the newly merged congregation through its early years. With 110 people attending weekly worship services, the church leaders believed that having paid staff to engage in various aspects of the ministry of the church would provide a stable environment for the early years of the merger, as well as potentially create the capacity for higher membership numbers. Yet, for all of the hopes and dreams of membership growth, church attendance has slowly been on the decline, with the church having spent a little over two million dollars of the endowment in the intervening eight years.

In the spring of 2016, the Consistory of New Life Reformed made the decision to begin to decrease its budgeted expenses by \$350,000 over the course of three years, to bring the budget more in line with annual congregational giving and other sources of income, such as from the rental of the facility during the week. This level of budget reduction meant that the current staff of nine needed to be reduced over the next three

years as well. The church leadership hoped that as these budget cuts took effect, congregation members would be ready to pick up the ministries that had traditionally been operated by paid staff. In late 2016, it became clear to the Consistory that the best course of action was to speed up the reductions, leaving the church with a staff of three on July 1, 2017.

Unfortunately, the congregation has not had a very active role in discussions regarding this move to a volunteer-driven model of church organization, and some have expressed dissatisfaction about some of the budget reductions, while other have expressed fear about the future of the ministry of New Life Reformed Church. My hope was that through the Action Research interventions and subsequent research timeframe, that the congregation members would begin to understand the very important role that they play in the future ministry of the church, as well as begin to more fully realize their own sense of God's mission in the world and their place in it.

Theoretical Lenses

There are three theoretical lenses through which I have examined my research question. They are *adaptive change theory*, *consumerism and social capital*, and *organizational theory*. These three lenses help to explain the current cultural context that New Life congregation members experience, as well as develop the theories around how cultural change at New Life will begin to happen as the congregation takes more ownership of the church's ministry.

Adaptive Change Theory

In their book *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe the intricate issues related to cultural change.³ They explain the difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges. In short, technical challenges require knowledge and skills that are already possessed by the system; they just need to be applied. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, require some kind of new learning, new discoveries, and adjustments by the entire organization.

The challenges that New Life is facing are varied, with many technical and adaptive characteristics. The lens of adaptive change theory helped to inform the interventions I led the congregation through, so that together we began to discover how the culture of the congregation needs to shift in order for more members to be involved in God's mission, both inside the church and outside of it.

Consumerism and Social Capital

Nearly all of the members of New Life Reformed Church live in suburban northern New Jersey. The contextual realities of this region are that houses are expensive, taxes are high, and people work long hours to make ends meet. As a result of these realities, the lifestyles of church members often follow consumeristic tendencies. People are less likely to actively participate in organizations outside of their own homes or their places of employment, and they are more likely to want to pay others to do work for them, such as landscaping and dry cleaning. This consumer mindset spills over into the

³ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

church as well, as can be seen in a greater reliance on paid staff to oversee ministries of the church that might be assumed by volunteers in other contexts.⁴

The AR interventions take into account the prevalence of this consumer cultural mindset, and the research is viewed through the lens of building social capital among congregation members of New Life. This building up of the church community will hopefully, in the future, translate into congregation members being able to build meaningful community connections in the places where they live. Those connections are key to understanding how God is at work in a given place, and how we are called to participate in that work.

Organizational Theory

The changing staff landscape at New Life Reformed Church and the shift to a volunteer-led ministry mean some organizational shifts have needed to happen as well. While there were not any staff changes made during the timing of the research itself, the overall atmosphere of change required examining and evaluating everything from our organizational structures to our leadership models.

Key resources for this lens include books written by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, Margaret Wheatley, and Landon Whitsitt.⁵ These books cover the basics of

⁴ Resources in this area of study include: Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008); John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

⁵ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013); Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999); Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011).

organizational theory, as well as explore the edges of possibility when it comes to experimentation and helping the church to find the organizational style and structure that will be right for the days ahead. In addition to these resources, I explored journal articles in business and church leadership journals to more broadly study the various edges of this theoretical lens. The particular organizational theories I treat in chapter two are Bolman's and Deal's four frame theory, Wheatley's quantum organizational theory, and Whitsitt's open source theory.

Biblical Lenses

There are three primary biblical lenses through which I approach this research: *the Babylonian exile of Judah as portrayed by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel; the elders of Israel prophesying in their tents as told in Numbers 11; and the sending of the disciples into the towns of Galilee as told in Luke 10*. These stories and texts help to frame metaphors for the emerging story of New Life Reformed Church in this new era of its existence.

Babylonian Exile

Jeremiah 29 and Ezekiel 37 are two stories that form the substance of this particular lens. The people are told in Jeremiah 29 to settle down in the exile community they find themselves in, and to work for the welfare of the city, living out their lives as faithful people until the day that God brings them relief. The members of New Life are experiencing an outside culture that does not recognize the religious beliefs and faith that they have clung to, and they are confused about how to be the church in this new reality. Jeremiah 29 functions as illustrative and instructive to this community of faith, and my research examined this congregation in light of that text.

God leads Ezekiel to a valley filled with bones in Ezekiel 37, and a question is posed to Ezekiel: Can these dry bones live? The same question could be posed to the New Life congregation that has largely been uninvolved in ministries designed to help them understand God's word. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the dry bones, and then to prophesy to the Spirit, that the bones might come together and that new life might be breathed into them. What new life might come into New Life by a renewed commitment to Christian education and a renewed reliance on the Holy Spirit?

Moses and the Seventy Elders

Moses has grown weary of the people's complaining in the wilderness in Numbers 11, so God gives him a gift: the gift of the Holy Spirit. Moses chooses seventy elders from among the people to receive the gift of prophecy, but only 68 come to the Tabernacle. The other two remained in the camp with the people. When those in the Tabernacle begin to prophesy, the two in the camp do as well. This gift of the Holy Spirit to even the reluctant among those chosen is a testimony to the power of the Spirit to act in powerful ways.

This story is a lens through which I examined the role of the Holy Spirit among members of the congregation, especially among those who would not describe themselves as church leaders. By combining this lens with the practice of communal discernment, the story of Moses' reluctant elders became a metaphor for the work of the Spirit through the members of New Life today.

Jesus Sends Seventy (or Seventy-two) Disciples

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Luke 10:2) Jesus sends disciples out into

the towns and villages to prepare for his arrival. They are to take nothing with them but the good news of the Kingdom of God, and when they find a person of peace, they are to stay with that person and rely on the hospitality of the stranger to feed them and shelter them. They enter the towns in positions of vulnerability and need, not as those who are privileged.

The members of New Life Reformed Church have grown accustomed to serving out of a privileged position. *We* have things that *they* need, so *we* will go to *them* to give *them* what *we* have. This lens guided the AR interventions to shine a light on our call to serve those in need out of a position of humility and vulnerability. What are some things that those we serve have to offer us? What does it mean for us to serve by taking nothing with us but the good news of the Kingdom of God?

Theological Lenses

There are three theological lenses that inform my research and analysis in this project: *missional ecclesiology*, *Trinitarian theology*, and *spiritual formation through spiritual practices*. These three lenses, when combined with the theoretical and biblical lenses discussed above, provided a comprehensive analysis of the work of God in and through the members of New Life Reformed Church.

Missional Ecclesiology

The Gospel and Our Culture Network first brought a conversation to America about the church as God's mission in the 1990s with the book *Missional Church*.⁶ Building on the work of theologians such as David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin,

⁶ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998).

Missional Church emphasized God's agency in the world in the concept of *missio Dei*, which is God's work in sending the church in mission. The church is essentially mission; mission is not just one program among many, but the core of the church's identity.

Since the writing of *Missional Church*, there has been an abundance of writing under the heading of missional theology. For this project, I have focused on the stream of missional theology that has its origins in the theology of Karl Barth, David Bosch, and Lesslie Newbigin.⁷ These texts form a theology of the church that could assist New Life Reformed in developing an ecclesiology of its own that understands the centrality of the *missio Dei* in its life and work.

Trinitarian Theology

One of the aspects of Christianity that distinguishes it from other world religions is that Christians worship God as Trinity. Missional theology places a special emphasis on this core tenet of Christian faith. This is an important lens for my research because of the emphasis on God as an eternal community which is mirrored in creation, and that community should be reflected in the local church. Embedded in this lens is a particular emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the local church.

⁷ In addition to *Missional Church*, there are many other resources I have utilized in this lens: Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995); David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007); Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007); Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Eberhard Busch, Darrell L. Guder, and Judith J. Guder, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004); Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

Resources I drew on through this lens included the writings of Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff on the subject of the Trinity proper, Michael Welker and Lois Malcolm on the work of the Holy Spirit, and several others on how these doctrines relate to the ministry of the local church.⁸ These resources were used to educate the members about the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as aid me in analyzing congregational attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in relation to who they believe God to be.

Spiritual Practices

The first two theological lenses described here focus on God's identity and God's action in the world. This third lens begins to define a theology of the church's action, in practices and disciplines which create an environment for spiritual growth and change. I viewed the research through this lens by developing action research interventions to help the congregation focus on practices, communally and individually, as well as analyzing the congregation's responses to quantitative instruments measuring spiritual practice and action.

Resources to assist me in understanding and describing the lens of spiritual practices include writings by Richard Foster, Miroslav Volf, Dorothy Bass, and others.⁹

⁸ These resources include: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013); Lois Malcolm, *Holy Spirit: Creative Power in Our Lives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009); Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1993); Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

⁹ J. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002); Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2012).

These writings helped to raise questions about New Life Reformed Church's current understanding of the role of spiritual practices and disciplines, as well as helped to inform congregation members about new practices that they might not have been aware of before.

Research Methodology

The methodology used for this research was insider Action Research (AR). As the leader of the church being studied, I am a participant in the system, and was involved in leading and implementing the various steps of the research process. I chose this methodology because it is especially useful in measuring change in systems, taking into account cycles of action and reflection at each step.

The research design utilized two questionnaires: a baseline questionnaire at the beginning of the research, and an end line questionnaire at the end.¹⁰ There were five AR interventions: an educational gathering centered on the Trinity; a congregational gathering for appreciative inquiry into the congregation's past; a congregational gathering for communal discernment of God's leading into the future; a healing service led by lay members of the congregation; and a service project away from the church facility. Three focus groups were conducted following the interventions. The instruments used for the research were field tested with members of a neighboring congregation.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in order to test for significant changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors from baseline to

¹⁰ These questionnaires can be found in appendices A and B.

end line. Qualitative data collected from focus groups and individual interviews were analyzed according to Kathy Charmaz' procedure for coding and theorizing.¹¹

Definitions of Key Terms

The following key terms are used throughout this thesis:

Consistory: the governing body of Reformed Church in America churches, made up of elders, deacons, and ministers of a local church.

missio Dei: God's sending action – God sends the Son and the Spirit, and the Triune God sends the church into the world. This also encapsulates the concept of God's action in the world, and the church's being called to participate in that action.

Consumerism: beliefs and actions oriented towards purchasing goods and services with the goal of increased satisfaction with life and increased happiness. The idea is often to have things that are bigger and better than the things of other people, along with a tendency to pay for services that might have traditionally been filled by other community members.

Missional: Mission is not just one program among many for a local church. The church was created by God for mission, to embody mission. Mission is at the very center of every aspect of a church's ministry. This corresponds closely with *missio Dei* and a belief in the Triune God.

¹¹ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2014). Charmaz' procedure involves initial coding using word-by-word, line-by-line, and *in vivo* coding, followed by focused coding by combining key words and concepts, and axial and theoretical coding. Also, Charmaz' procedure includes memo-writing throughout the research process.

Triune God: the belief in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as three distinct persons living in eternal community with one another as one God. The eternal community of God is reflected in the community of disciples known as the church.

Church: I am writing about the people in the church community when I use the term *church*. If I am writing about the church building or facility, I will make that distinction clear.

Conformation to IRB Standards and Ethical Concerns

As this research project is an insider Action Research project, one area of ethical concern is my own participation, both as researcher and participant in the change. I made good use of coding, journaling, and memos to ensure that my analysis of the data was as unbiased as possible, and that the outcomes did not easily conform to my hoped-for conclusions. To help ensure this neutrality I made use of my congregational cohort, made up of fellow Consistory members, to offer help in analyzing data and drawing conclusions.

The core of my research is the questionnaires, focus groups, and individual interviews, but the interventions themselves brought insight into the institutional and cultural dynamics at play in the congregation's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. With that in mind, every participant in the interventions was made aware that I as the researcher was observing the events. While I did not use individual statements in the final report, these events served to help in the interpretation of the data that were collected from the questionnaires and focus groups. Therefore, participants were informed that by participating, they were research subjects.

No sensitive information was discussed or collected as part of this research, and participation was completely optional. There were no benefits or rewards for those who participated. The first and second interventions were designed as church luncheons, and some of the focus groups were provided light refreshments.

Some of the elderly members of the congregation suffer from medical conditions that may make them prone to dementia or memory loss. While these members may have been included in the meals and activities as part of the interventions, they were excluded from the focus groups to ensure that no sensitive populations were being studied as a part of this survey. Also, only church members over the age of eighteen were allowed to participate in the focus groups and questionnaires.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research project, discussed its significance for the local church and the Church universal, and introduced the key lenses through which I have designed and implemented the research. Chapter two presents a more thorough discussion of the historical circumstances that brought New Life Reformed Church to this point in its life, and I discuss the theoretical lenses used in the research. Chapter three presents the biblical and theological lenses through which this research can be analyzed. Chapter four presents the research methodology utilized in this project, and chapter five presents the results of the research. I draw conclusions and suggest next steps in chapter six. The appendices and back matter provide the instruments and protocols for the research.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL LENSES

Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of a project examining participation in the ministry of God. This chapter provides a brief treatment of the historical context for the project, as well as presenting theoretical lenses through which I have framed the project.

History and Context

New Life Reformed Church was founded in 2008 as a merging of two existing congregations with very similar histories and cultures. When the merger occurred, the members of the two churches decided to sell one of the facilities and place the three million dollars from the sale in an endowment, in order to fund the future ministry of the newly formed church. The hope of early leaders of New Life was that with a larger base of members and a more stable financial footing, the church would be able to attract new members more easily than either of the former churches had been able to do.

The pastor of one of the churches became the senior pastor of New Life, and the church called a second full-time pastor to focus on ministries of congregational care. A staff position in the area of youth ministry was continued from one of the prior churches, and the music director from one of the churches was retained as well by New Life. The hiring of an office administrator to oversee two secretaries, a landscaper, a bookkeeper,

and a sexton brought the total number of staff to ten: two full-time pastors and the rest part-time lay members. The staff size was intentional, with the thought being that more staff would mean a more vital church, and that this would attract new members to the church. This would make the tremendous financial investment in human resources worthwhile. The senior pastor retired in 2011, and I was called to the church as Lead Pastor in 2013.

In the years that New Life has been in existence, the hopes and dreams of membership growth have not come to fruition. Worship attendance in 2016 is in the 80s, and the endowment has dwindled to less than a third of what it was in 2008. The church can no longer support the staff that it once had, so staff positions have begun to be eliminated. These budget decisions have caused some tension in the congregation, as church members wonder what kind of ministry the church can have without the staff that it has had. If money and staff were not the answer to the problems that each of the previous individual congregations had faced, then what will it take to change, to thrive?

During the process of conducting this research, the Consistory of New Life made the decision to move forward with the final budget cuts, which effectively eliminated most positions as of the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 2017. During the research process the congregation was informed of the Consistory's decision. In chapter four I mention this again as it pertains to this event as an intervening variable in the research project.

At its creation, the board of New Life created a mission statement consisting of three focal points: youth ministry, congregational care, and outreach. While these foci were meant to extend the reach of the congregation out into the community, they failed to reach beyond the church itself, and ministry continued in a church-centric, maintenance

mode of operation.¹ The congregation members were well served as consumers of a religious product, but the effect was mostly limited to those congregation members.

Theoretical Lenses

Three lenses shape my design and analysis of this project from a theoretical perspective: adaptive change theory, consumerism and community, and organizational theory. When taken together, these lenses provide key insights for the Action Research intervention designs that I describe in chapter five.

Adaptive Change Theory

The challenges that New Life Reformed Church faces did not appear overnight. They developed as part of a culture that predates the 2008 merger, a culture present in both parent churches. Heifetz and Linsky provide the terms *technical* and *adaptive* to describe different challenges facing organizations like New Life.² *Technical* challenges are challenges that can be addressed using skills and knowledge that are already present in the organization. If a light bulb is burned out, we can buy a new bulb, purchase a ladder, and change it. If our budgeted expenses exceed our income, we can cut expenses to balance the budget. These challenges may not be easy, but the skills and knowledge to address them are already present. *Adaptive* challenges, on the other hand, require new knowledge and skills, those that are not already present in the organization. New learning and experimentation are required to address adaptive challenges. In the case of New Life,

¹ For further description of this maintenance mode, see David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), Kindle Edition, location 527.

² Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 14-15.

the low participation of congregation members in ministries outside of Sunday morning worship services is an adaptive challenge, because it requires a change in the culture.

The role of leadership changes when adaptive change is needed in an organization. A distinction can be drawn between *authority* and *leadership*.³ As a pastor, the church recognizes in me authority in several different categories: in worship, I am given the authority of preacher and teacher; at the Consistory table, I am given the authority of administrator and expertise in addressing challenges the church is facing; in counseling, I am given the authority to help people in their connection with God and in thinking through their problems. In each case, due to my training and expertise, I am expected to perform the tasks and roles of the congregation's understanding of being a pastor. *Leadership*, on the other hand, involves pushing through the boundaries of authority to affect change that is beyond the given authority. For example, the expectation New Life has of its pastor is that the pastor will tell the Consistory what to do for the church to grow, spiritually, numerically, and financially. Leadership involves tempering those expectations by giving some of that work back to the Consistory and the congregation, putting the system into a state of disequilibrium for new skills to emerge. This reframing of expectations can cause anxiety in the system, so it is also necessary for the leader to monitor that anxiety to keep it at a healthy, productive level.

The first step in addressing adaptive challenges is attending to the system to successfully identify and frame the challenges. The leadership of New Life Reformed Church has identified that an overreliance on paid staff to actively engage in ministry has

³ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 23ff.

led to a congregational culture of consumerism. The financial situation of the church has led to a reduction in staff and other expenses, and that has left many wondering how the church will continue to minister in all the ways it has over the previous eight years. The corresponding adaptive challenge is increasing the congregation's participation in ministry so that the church can thrive in new circumstances and the congregation can take ownership of ministry.

The AR interventions implemented in this project were designed with adaptive change in mind, moving people beyond their normal modes of operation in the church towards experimentation, with a goal of the church embracing a shared vision and purpose for the future. Two of the interventions were designed to help people engage in conversations about past and present values and realities for the church, as well as dreaming about the church of the future. Much of this discernment involves the theological aspect of identifying where God is at work in and around us. New Life is used to having a strong leader hand them a map and tell them where they are going, so participating in discovering the map – and perhaps drawing part of it themselves – is an experimental exercise in faith.

Craig Van Gelder presents a process that I believe addresses adaptive challenges, one that informs the processes involved in addressing the main challenge pertinent to this project.⁴ The first step was discussed above: *attending*. Once the issue has been adequately framed and defined, the next step can commence: *asserting*. Asserting is a process of thinking through possible courses of action to bring about the change that is needed. With many options on the table, the group *agrees* on one course of action to try.

⁴ Craig Van Gelder, "The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1-2 (2004).

That *action* occurs, then the group *assesses* the effectiveness of the action by reflecting on the process and outcome of the intervention. The process then begins anew, with the beginning point being *attending* to any change that occurred. This iterative process includes data collection and reflection time, what Heifetz and Linsky would call “viewing from the balcony.”⁵

One additional aspect of adaptive change is new, innovative action. The AR interventions described in chapter four were meant to provide a safe space for innovative thinking. Dwight J. Zscheile describes disciplines for an innovating church in *Agile Church: Spirit-led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*.⁶ These disciplines are designed to help churches explore new ways of being the church, learning from failure and being encouraged by the new learning that occurs. This innovation is the key to the iterative process of action and reflection that leads to adaptive change.

The work of attending to the challenge of congregational participation in the ministry of the church is work that the New Life Consistory has engaged in over the past two years. The learning throughout this Doctor of Ministry program has helped to assert and agree on the AR interventions described in this project. After each intervention, and at the end of the formal research period, data were collected for the purpose of assessing the action, with subsequent action being planned as a result.

Adaptive change takes time and patience. The current culture of New Life was not created in a day, and it will not change overnight. This research project has been designed

⁵ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 53.

⁶ Dwight J. Zscheile, *Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 89ff.

as a starting point, with the hope of seeing the beginnings of a shift in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of members of this congregation.

Consumerism and Community

In the suburbs of New York City, especially in northern New Jersey, there is a pervasive culture of consumerism present. Block and McKnight define the “consumer way” as looking outside of the immediate community or neighborhood for goods and services that might otherwise be provided by one’s neighbors or by oneself.⁷ Families work long hours to pay for the basic needs that a lack of time keeps them from doing themselves. Driving around the neighborhoods surrounding New Life Reformed Church demonstrates this reality, with landscaping companies working on every street and dry-cleaning establishments on most corners. While towns have small businesses that could provide many of these services, it is not uncommon for residents to travel to other communities for these same services. The same can be said for education, healthcare, and entertainment. The suburban economy shows that most people would rather pay for these services than rely on a friend or neighbor to help them accomplish them themselves.

The result of this consumer way is that nearly every task of society is left up to experts and specialists who provide paying customers with the services they need. This consumer way is present in churches as well. The large staff of New Life was highly specialized to meet the desired ministries of church members. The senior pastor was responsible for preaching sermons that the congregation would find relevant and entertaining. The congregational care minister was responsible for visiting the elderly and

⁷ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 11.

those who are sick or hospitalized. The youth ministry director was responsible for programming for the middle school and high school students in the church. The music director was responsible for providing music that is pleasing to the ear for those present on Sunday mornings. Each staff member had a specialized role to play, meaning that a busy congregation can come to the church on a Sunday morning for a meaningful experience, but the congregation itself had very little responsibility for the church's ministry, beyond paying for it with financial gifts in the offering plate.

Block and McKnight contrast the “consumer way” with the “citizen way.”⁸ If the consumer way is about scarcity and consumption, then the citizen way is about abundance and cooperation. It is a recognition that there is great diversity of gifts and skills present in most neighborhoods and communities. When those passions are discovered by others, it leads to cooperative efforts that are mutually beneficial to all involved. For example, when neighbors know each other and are watching out for each other, the police are no longer the sole providers of security and safety, which makes their job much easier and makes the community much safer. If there are high school or college students in the neighborhood that are looking to earn some money, they could mow lawns or help elderly neighbors with computer problems. If someone has a passion for gardening, they can offer others in the neighborhood the opportunity to come alongside of them and learn what might be an exciting new hobby, thus beautifying the neighborhood in the process. While some specialization might be necessary in those instances when talents and gifts are not present in the neighborhood, many things that the

⁸ Ibid., 14.

community needs could be supplied by those who live and work there. This would free people from the cycle of *earn and spend* that currently defines their lives.

The shift from the consumer way to the citizen way is a prime example of an adaptive challenge. A different approach to leadership is needed to meet this challenge. I have already written about the traditional leadership models for New Life Reformed Church that have supported a consumer way for the congregation. The leaders are responsible for discerning the vision and mission of the church, and then that responsibility continues in communicating the vision and mission and trying to get everyone on board. The church elects a governing board (the Consistory) to work with the staff on the mission and vision, and to serve the governance structures in place. This leaves the average congregation member out of most leadership decisions. When members disagree with decisions that have been made, they complain about a lack of transparency, accountability, and communication from those that are leaders. These complaints incentivize the Consistory to only make benign decisions that will not upset the congregation.

Leadership on the citizen way is different. Leaders create space and context for community members to gather together to engage in meaningful activities and conversations with one another. These activities are not meaningful because they accomplish some necessary task; instead, they provide a context for shared experience and mutual understanding. Leaders ask questions for the community to reflect on with one another, and the questions asked are more important than the answers that are generated.⁹ The community in conversation is prompted to offer what gifts they can

⁹ Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 101-110.

contribute to the mutual benefit of the community as a whole, which promotes the abundance and cooperation of the citizen way.

Traditional thinking is that great pastors make great churches, and it takes pastoral expertise for a church to thrive. This project poses an alternative: great members make great churches. Members are encouraged to invest personally into the ministry of God in the place God has placed them, with ministers, elders, and deacons coming alongside to act as conveners, interpreters, and resources to help the members in their participation.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam defines *social capital* as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁰ This has both individual and collective aspects to it: a person may be enriched by interaction with another person, but the whole of an organization or society also benefits from that interaction.¹¹ Putnam also draws a distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. *Bonding* is that which gives an organization strength and connection within itself, but can sometimes result in being closed to outsiders, whereas *bridging* seeks to draw connections with broad populations for particular causes.¹²

The aim of this AR project was to create social connections that are both *bonding* and *bridging*, connecting congregation members with one another and with those who are outside the church. The church must focus on both of these aspects of social capital and community if it is to thrive in this time of sweeping change—we must grow into a

¹⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 19.

¹¹ Ibid., 20.

¹² Ibid., 22.

stronger community and we must find connection points with the community in which God has planted us.

Organizational Theory

New ways of leading and new ways of addressing challenges mean a rethinking of how churches organize themselves. If the traditional leadership structures of New Life—ministers, staff, Consistory and committees—support and reinforce consumer behavior out of congregation members, then these structures will need to be experimented with as well to support a renewed focus on congregational participation.

Relationship and Self-Organization

Wheatley writes in *Leadership and the New Science* about the differences between organizations in a Newtonian age and those in a quantum age.¹³ Most organizations have a set structure in place for ordinary functions and for dealing with problems and challenges. There is a clear distinction between the organization and individuals, with the belief that a change in the structure will affect a change in the individual. When action is needed, there is careful strategic planning needed first, with clear goals and predictable outcomes – a clear example of Heifetz’ and Linksy’s technical approach to challenges. Wheatley advocates for a different approach, taken from quantum theory: individual behavior and structures have effects on each other, and an organization’s action creates the environment in which it operates. The organization’s focus will be the very thing that it notices, to the exclusion of other factors. Therefore, it

¹³ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 27ff.

makes more sense for these organizations to act and observe, and allow what is observed to dictate what action comes next – an example of an adaptive approach to change.

What this practically means for organizations is that, rather than having rigid structures in place to dictate behavior, the structures ought to be fluid and malleable by the actions of the individuals themselves. Instead of imposing an organizational model, this new approach allows for the system to self-organize into whatever is most effective. The leader's role is to focus on process and relationship instead of cause and effect. According to Wheatley, the basic unit of nature is not the individual or particle; it is relationships.¹⁴ Particles in nature are always influenced by the movements of other particles. In order for organizations to thrive in that reality, it will be important to recognize the centrality of relationship in the reorganizing of leadership structures.

Reframing Organizations

Bolman and Deal write in *Reframing Organizations* about a four-frame model through which organizations can be understood.¹⁵ The *structural frame* focuses on organizational structures and how to change those structures to get results. The *human resources frame* focuses on the people in the organization, with an eye towards improving management and building positive group dynamics. The *political frame* focuses on political dynamics in an organization, with particular focus on uses of power and conflict. The *symbolic frame* focuses on meaning and culture within an organization. These four frames, when examined together, help to provide a lens through which to view many dynamics that define what is happening inside of an organizational system.

¹⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 19.

Much of the focus of this project will be in the human resource and symbolic frames, as the congregation of New Life Reformed Church gathers to build relationships and discern their shared purpose in God's mission. There are also political dynamics to consider as leaders are asked to change the way they understand leadership and perhaps accept a role with less emphasis on power and authority. The symbolic frame is especially important as the congregation discovers its story and its voice, the metaphors and symbols that give meaning to the gathering that takes place, and each person's place in that story.

Adaptive challenges require reframing problems and solutions. It would be far too easy to say that New Life has structural problems due to a lack of financial resources, or a human resource problem due to an abundance of staff. But when taken together, the four frames model allows the organization to see itself and its challenges from multiple vantage points, which also helps leaders get to the balcony described by Heifetz and Linsky.

Open Source Church

Landon Whitsitt writes in *Open Source Church* about the distinction between the *cathedral* church and the *bazaar* church.¹⁶ In the cathedral, a select few people are decision makers, dictating to everyone else what is going to be done. The community may not be aware of how the decisions are made. Rather than communicating the process, cathedral leaders will often communicate the decision. The bazaar, on the other hand, is a church in which everyone has access to the decision-making process. Anyone who is interested may participate in that process.

¹⁶ Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All*, 30.

New Life Reformed Church could be categorized a *cathedral* according to the classification by Whitsitt. The staff and consistory have discussions, pray, and discern behind closed doors at official meetings. While the congregation is invited to attend a Consistory meeting any time they would like, no one ever does. When the status quo is maintained, most do not get upset with this arrangement. But in the recent days of financial cutbacks, the wisdom of the leaders is called into question, and accusations of a lack of transparency are brought forth. The *experts* are trusted as long as people agree with what they say and do, but disagreement brings turmoil and a decline in morale across the entire system.

The focus of this project is moving more toward a de-centralized, *bazaar* style of organization, one in which more of the congregation has access to decision-making opportunities. This will not be simple given the polity and structure that is currently in place, not only locally for New Life, but also for all churches in the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the historical context of New Life Reformed Church and the theoretical lenses that shape and inform this project. The next chapter introduces the theological and biblical lenses that further frame the project.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

Introduction

My research question concerns moving church members to active participation in the ministry of God: *How might an Action Research intervention move congregation members towards playing an active role in the ministry of God, both within the church, and outside it?* With this question in mind, the research is shaped by theological and biblical lenses. These lenses, when combined with the theoretical lenses described in chapter two, form the focus of this project and inform the shape of the research methodology, which will be described in chapter four.

Theological Lenses

The discipline of theology seeks to ask questions about God and the universe, probing the identity of each as a way of informing the lives of faithful followers of God. For the purposes of this research, I am focusing on three theological lenses: Trinitarian theology, missional theology, and spiritual practices.

Trinitarian Theology

The basis for this project is rooted in the triune God, particularly in the eternal relationship among the three persons of God. Many volumes have been written on Trinitarian theology, much more extensively than what I am able to compile in these few pages. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on the doctrine of Trinity as it

relates to the relational view of the creation of the world and its implications for the church.

In the conclusion of *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, liberation theologian Leonardo Boff writes about the relational identity of the Trinity:

What makes it possible to catch a glimpse of why the three divine Persons are one God is *perichoresis*. Perichoresis signifies the eternal interrelating that exists among the divine Three. Each person lives from the other, with the other, through the other, and for the other Person. From all eternity they are interwoven and interpenetrated, so that we cannot think or speak of one Person, such as the Father, without having to also think and speak of the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹

The doctrine of the Trinity is not only a key theological distinctive for Christianity, but it is also a marker for the centrality of relationship as building block of the universe. As I mentioned above, quantum scientific theory has rejected the idea of the individual particle as being the basic element of nature, instead elevating the relationships between particles as being basic to all creation.² Jürgen Moltmann describes the creation of the world as an act of Trinitarian love among the persons of the Trinity, with that love spreading outward.³ The creation of the world is through the Son, “breathed out through the Holy Spirit in the eternal utterance of the Word.”⁴

Richard Rohr continues this theme of the Trinity being mirrored in creation in *The Divine Dance*:

The energy in the universe is not in the planets, or in the protons or neutrons, but in *the relationship between them*. Not in the particles but in the space between them. Not in the cells of organisms but in the way the cells feed and give feedback to one another. Not in any precise *definition* of the three persons of the

¹ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 111. Emphasis Boff's.

² Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 34.

³ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, 108.

⁴ Ibid.

Trinity as much as in the *relationship between the Three*! This is where all the power for infinite renewal is at work: The loving relationship between them. The infinite love between them. The dance itself. In other words, it is an entirely relational universe. If at any time, we try to stop this flow moving through us, with us, and in us, we fall into the true state of sin – and it is truly a state more than a momentary behavior.⁵

Since it is well established that this relational aspect of God, and of creation, is of vital importance, then it follows that relationship is central to the identity of the church as well. Again, from Boff:

When the church forgets the source that gives it birth – the communion of the three divine Persons – it allows its unity to become uniformity; it lets one group of believers by itself assume all responsibilities, keeping others from participating; it allows its confessional interests to prevail over the interests of the reign; in short, the river of bright waters is in danger of becoming a stagnant pond. We must be converted to the Trinity to recover diversity and communion, which create the dynamic unity that is ever open to new enrichment.⁶

When the church owns its identity in the identity of the Trinity, and it begins to live into that identity, it reflects the richness and diversity of God and creation. By focusing in on this attribute of God in the AR interventions, the church will truly begin to discover what it means to live life as God means for it to be lived.

Missional Theology

Out of this understanding of God as Trinity comes *missional theology*, with a focus on the identity of the church as a sent people. At the core of God's nature and identity, God is a missional God, meaning that God sends: the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, and the three send the church to participate in the sending work of God.⁷ So if

⁵ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), 56.

⁶ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 67.

⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 389ff.

God is, by nature, a sending God, then the church is, by nature, a sent people. This means that every member of the body of Christ is, by nature, a person sent by God for a purpose. In essence, everyone is a missionary of God. Lesslie Newbigin's writing on the subject of theology of mission has had a significant impact of my understanding of missional theology.⁸

The church has often considered mission to be one of a number of ministry activities to engage in, placing it alongside of worship, discipleship, fellowship, and other such ministries. With this thinking, a church can choose when to be involved in mission, and when to withdraw. In my experience, mission is often the first thing to cut from a budget when a church is faced with financial difficulties. If mission is just one ministry among many, then other ministries might be given priority by a church, especially when these other ministries will benefit church members directly.

In contrast to this concept of mission is the idea of mission being central to a church's identity. If mission is at the center of who the church is created to be, then every activity the church does has mission as its focus.⁹ Other ministries have a *sent* nature to them. Worship acknowledges God's activity in the world and gives an invitation to the congregation to participate. Discipleship is akin to mission training, learning not only to discern what is in God's word, but also what God is up to in the world.¹⁰

For the purposes of this project, missional theology was emphasized in the AR interventions. It should be noted that missional theology has been infused into the

⁸ See Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*.

⁹ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 31.

¹⁰ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 68-79.

preaching and leadership development that has been taking place at New Life Reformed Church since I was called to be its pastor. The language of mission has begun to find its place in the vernacular of the church, but up to this point has not been given primacy in the church's official identity statements. Exploring the sent-ness of the church is a major focus of this research.

Spiritual Practices

With an emphasis on the church's identity mirroring the Trinity and the church's participation in God's work in the world comes a focus on spiritual practices: how does the church come to understand and interpret its role in God's action? What are the disciplines and practices that help church members, individually and collectively, to understand their particular place in participating in God's mission?

The traditional spiritual practices that most members of New Life Reformed Church practice are prayer and devotional reading. As is the case with much of suburban American life, they practice these disciplines in the comfort of their own homes, by themselves.¹¹ While the church distributes devotional guides that many in the church take and read, Christian practices have not been communally exercised much at all. While the practices that church members have undertaken are a rich source of meaning in their individual lives, there has not been a mechanism for reflections and learnings to be shared with other members of the body of Christ. With the pace of life as fast as it is, often these individual practices are the first to get cut out of a busy day, leaving people with feelings of regret or a need to make excuses about how they will do better next time.

¹¹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 71-72.

This project seeks to move congregation members towards a more shared experience of Spiritual disciplines, especially through the use of exercises in communal discernment of scripture and the past, present, and future of the life of New Life Reformed Church. Utilizing such tools as *Dwelling in the Word* and *Discerning God's Will Together*, the gathered congregation will have the opportunity to “listen one another into free speech,”¹² acknowledging that the Holy Spirit often speaks through the collective wisdom of a gathered assembly.¹³

These communal spiritual practices function on two levels. First, they help the congregation to be a more cohesive unit. By reading Scripture passages together and reflecting on where the voice of God might be present in their midst, people develop a deeper understanding of each other's lives and life situations, discoveries not possible over a quick cup of coffee as everyone rushes out of a Sunday morning worship service. These deep conversations leave people vulnerable to one another, which builds up the unity of the body in constructive ways, perhaps inviting them to participate together in what God is doing.

Second, these communal practices function to listen for the voice of God and to discern God's will for the church and for the community. There are plenty of shared activities a group of people could do in order to build trust and rapport with one another. These distinctly Christian practices of discernment are meant to move the body of Christ closer in alignment with the action of God. This discernment is also a missional activity

¹² Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*, 163.

¹³ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, 5; Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church*, 46.

because it seeks to move the church deeper into its own sent identity, in order to be sent into the world as ambassadors for the triune God. Later, in chapter four, I will describe the spiritual practices used for that communal discernment.

Biblical Lenses

In addition to the theological lenses, there are three biblical lenses that inform my research and the interventions involved in this project. These themes are *the Babylonian exile*, *Moses and the elders*, and *Jesus sending the seventy*.

The Babylonian Exile: Jeremiah 29 and Ezekiel 37

Living in northern New Jersey at the start of the twenty-first century means living in a culture that no longer places Christianity on a pedestal above all other faiths (or no faith at all). New Life Reformed Church has struggled with adapting to this reality, as demonstrated by beliefs and behaviors geared toward attracting those who are actively seeking a church family. The church has sought to make itself as attractive as possible, but has been slow to realize that there are not many people seeking a Christian church. This has made the church feel as if it is living in a strange place, one church members have not chosen to live in.

Much of the writing of the latter prophets concerns a community in exile. In Jeremiah 29 and Ezekiel 37, the exiled community is in need of hope. How should they live in this new reality? Can these dry bones live?

The Babylonian exile requires a change in thinking. Exile is an adaptive challenge! Applying old thinking and methods to this new situation will not bring about the change that God is seeking to make in the people. A change is needed when the temple is the center of religious life and the temple is no longer available.

Jeremiah prophesies to the exiles:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:6-7).¹⁴

Rather than sequestering themselves from the strange culture they find themselves in, God calls the people to participate in the society, to seek its welfare. God has placed them there for a reason, even though they may not now understand what that reason is. God has not abandoned them, but God has put them exactly where they need to be:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

The way to freedom and the road back home is through the welfare of Babylon. They have reason to hope that the exile will not be permanent, but in order for it to end, the people will need to change. Perhaps in their changed hearts and minds they will find that the place where they are is no longer exile, but has become home.

The culture of northern New Jersey is not likely to change in the church's favor. For New Life Reformed Church to seek the welfare of the city requires learning about our neighbors, getting to know the communities in which our members are situated. The church has not needed to do that in recent memory, so new skills and learning are needed.

¹⁴ All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

God's promised faithfulness to the Israelites in the midst of their adaptive challenges becomes a lens through which to understand our own challenges.

The exile is approached from a different perspective in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel. In the thirty-seventh chapter, Ezekiel is brought by the hand of God to a valley that is filled with bones that are very dry. God commands Ezekiel to proclaim the word of God to the bones, to command the wind to come over the bones and bring them to life. Ezekiel obeys, and the bones are made alive! Then God explains what is happening:

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

The technical changes that New Life Reformed Church has already made to try to come to terms with living in exile have been difficult for many to take. The staff reductions have left some with a lack of optimism about the future of the church. This project seeks to restore hope to the people, through examination of our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and through learning new skills to adapt to the new reality in which we find ourselves.

Moses and the Elders: Numbers 11

Moses is tired of leading the people of Israel. He is tired of their complaining. He is tired of representing God and God's word to them, only to have them disobey. Moses is irritated, so he cries out to God for help. God sends help, instructing Moses to choose a group of elders from among the tribes of Israel and have them gather in the tent. When

they gather, the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they begin to prophesy. Strangely, two elders who were chosen by Moses seem not to have accepted the invitation to the tent. But when the Holy Spirit falls upon those in the tent, the Spirit also falls on these two in their homes! They too prophesy, much to the dismay of their fellow Israelites and Moses' assistant, Joshua. But Moses is not dismayed: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"¹⁵

This story illustrates one of the ways the Holy Spirit moves among a community of people, even in those instances when the people are unwilling participants! Most common leadership models promote leaders like Moses when he goes up the mountain to receive a word from God, then comes back down the mountain to tell the people what they are supposed to do. This project rejects that model for a different Moses model: the Moses of Numbers 11, who asks God to distribute the Holy Spirit to many in the community, so that the people themselves are able to experience God's presence, but also will have a role to play in discerning the will of God.

The AR interventions are designed with this biblical lens in mind. Out of the conviction that the Holy Spirit speaks to more than just the senior leader, these interventions invite the congregation to seek the movement of the Spirit in their midst, to recognize how the Spirit has been at work in the past and present, and to discern how the Spirit will move in the future.

¹⁵ Numbers 11:29 (NRSV)

This lens also factors in the unwilling participant in God's work, the several who will be resistant to the movement of the Holy Spirit. God is able to move anyone to action through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Jesus Sends the Seventy: Luke 10

One of the elements of ministry that has been lacking from New Life Reformed Church is mission. While the church has been financially generous to a number of mission organizations, there has been limited engagement in hands-on mission efforts. While the church's mission statement places an emphasis on *outreach*, it is one emphasis among three, the one that has gotten the least attention, and the one most likely for congregational observation rather than participation.

As mentioned above, one of the theological lenses for this project is missional theology, which places mission at the very center of the church's identity. Missional theology emphasizes the sending nature of God, acknowledging that every Christian is sent into mission in the world. This sent-ness is expressed in Jesus' sending of the seventy in Luke 10. These disciples are sent with these instructions:

He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town" (Luke 10:2-12).

This passage is emphasized in the AR interventions, especially as it pertains to communal discernment and spiritual practices. Jesus sends his disciples into communities with nothing, so that they will need to rely on people of peace as they preach and teach. They come not as those from a privileged position to provide for those in need, but as servants depending on the valuable gifts that others have to contribute. For New Life, this shift might be the most difficult of all, considering the relative wealth that is present in the congregation.

Jesus sends his disciples to places where they have not been, “as lambs into the midst of wolves.” This is dangerous work, and likely far outside the comfort zones for those seventy disciples. Yet, as one New Life member has observed, “It is when we are pushed beyond our comfort zones that God has a way of making himself known.” Luke 10 demonstrates the sending nature of God, and the growth that is possible from following where we are sent.

Conclusion

This chapter provided the biblical and theological lenses that provide a framework through which to view this research project. These lenses, together with the theoretical lenses described in chapter 2, reveal the full context of this work. The next chapter describes the research methodology and methods used to study the research question in the congregation of New Life Reformed Church.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The question that drives this research project is:

How might an Action Research intervention move congregation members towards playing an active role in the ministry of God, both within the church, and outside it?

In a congregation that has grown used to being served by church leaders, a key aspect to future growth is the ability of that congregation to engage in active ministry, to move from “consumer” to “citizen”, in the words of Block and McKnight.¹ This willingness to engage in active ministry must go beyond simple volunteerism in the church; it must extend to participation in God’s mission outside the church as well. This project introduced the congregation of New Life Reformed Church to a new way of thinking about being the church, through education and experimentation.

The social science research methodology I have utilized to research my question is Action Research (AR).

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge.

¹ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 7.

Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.²

AR involves researchers studying and affecting change in an organization of which they have a role or function. I am a pastor at New Life, which makes AR an appropriate research methodology. AR also takes into account contextual factors, and it depends on partnership among the members of the organization. All members of the church need to be involved in order for change to come about in the organization. AR is the ideal methodology to make that change a reality.

AR is my preferred research methodology from a biblical and theological perspective. The book of Acts is, in essence, a story of the apostles utilizing a kind of action research in spreading the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to “Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).” Their journeys into new places were filled with experimentation, but they were led by the Holy Spirit. Upon entering a new town, they gathered information about the people there, usually by beginning in a synagogue. Then they told the story of Jesus in a way that would best connect with the people and culture they had encountered. After spending time there and preaching the Gospel, they evaluated whether they needed to stay longer or move along to the next place. While not a perfect equivalence to AR, this shows that for the apostles, and for me, understanding the context prior to taking action matters a great deal.

AR in a church requires listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is a theological reading of the contextual data that comes prior to planning action. It is this

² David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2009), 4.

discernment piece that makes AR the right choice for addressing my research question from a theological perspective.

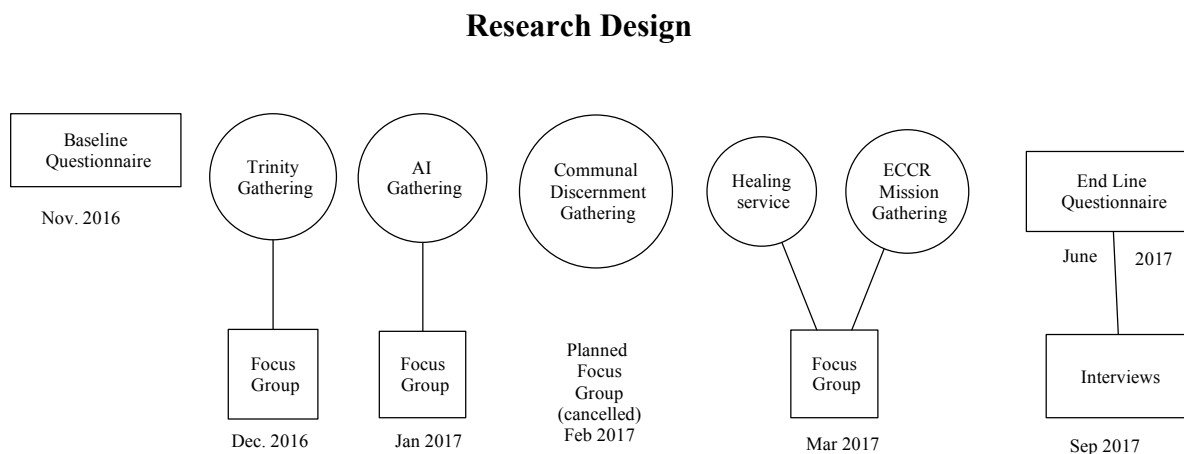


Figure 1. Research Project Timeline

The research method used for this project was concurrent mixed-methods. This research took place from November of 2016 until September of 2017. All of the active members of New Life Reformed Church over the age of 18 were invited to participate in the research. I administered a questionnaire to a census of the congregation members at the beginning and end of the research period.³ Members were invited to participate in the questionnaires through email, announcements printed in the bulletin, and verbal announcements made during the worship services. These questionnaires measured the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the members as those things relate to the congregation's participation in ministry. Participation was measured using Likert scales, measuring attendance at Bible studies and classes, stewardship, optimism about the future ministry of the church, and the importance of faith in Christ to daily life. The purpose of these questionnaires was to establish a baseline of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors at the

³ These questionnaires can be found in appendices A and B.

beginning of the study, and to measure changes at the end of the research period. The questionnaires were administered through Survey Monkey and distributed in paper form on Sunday mornings.⁴ The questionnaires remained open for three weeks. I also conducted three interviews following the administering of the end line questionnaire to help explain the results of that questionnaire. Those who finished the questionnaire were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed, and interviewees were chosen from among that population.

There were five AR interventions planned for the research period. These interventions utilized principles of appreciative inquiry and communal discernment, along with education and experimentation with Christian service outside the church.⁵ A focus group was intended to be gathered from among the participants of each intervention to study the effectiveness of the intervention and to provide feedback for the design and implementation of subsequent interventions.⁶ Focus group members were selected as a convenience sample, open to the first 6-8 members who volunteered to participate.

The first intervention was an educational event where congregation members learned about the Trinity through the story of Advent. Members listened to readings from the Old Testament prophets and to the events and songs of Luke 1. Members also viewed two works of art depicting the Trinity and were invited to reflect on how their common conceptions of the Trinity agreed and disagreed. Through this learning the congregation

⁴ Survey Monkey is an online survey tool. For more, visit <http://www.surveymonkey.com>.

⁵ Resources guiding these interventions include: Matthew Fifolt and Lori Lander, "Cultivating Change Using Appreciative Inquiry," *New Directions for Student Services* Fall 2013, no. 143 (2013). Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*.

⁶ One of these focus groups was cancelled due to inclement weather, and the fourth and fifth planned interventions shared a single focus group, since the interventions took place on the same day.

was invited to think about how the community of New Life Reformed Church is a reflection of the community of God as represented in the Trinity. This event also introduced congregation members to spiritual practices that they could practice to have an impact on their relationships, with God and with one another. This event took place on December 4, 2016.

The second intervention was an appreciative inquiry gathering for congregation members to describe a time when they believe the church was at its best, to name what they think the core values of the church are, and to name wishes that they have about the church. The purpose of this intervention was to engage congregation members in the positive aspects of ministry at New Life Reformed Church, and begin to understand the gifts and passions that the Holy Spirit has given to the congregation. This event took place on January 29, 2017.

The third intervention was a congregational gathering focused on communal discernment. Seated at tables of 8-10 people, each table engaged in Dwelling in the Word⁷ around the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 and engaged in conversation about that passage, the learnings from the December and January events, and the sense of God's calling for the future of New Life. Each table then presented its responses to the large group, where further conversation, discernment, and prayer ensued. This event took place on February 26, 2017.

The fourth intervention was a service project outside the church, where the congregation was invited to serve at a local facility for persons with severe disabilities. New Life is being considered for the possibility of being a home church for a new group

⁷ Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*, 68-71.

home that is opening in the area, so this service opportunity was an introduction to the residents of that community. The purpose of this service project was to move congregation members outside their comfort zones and experience Christian service outside the church facility. This service opportunity was paired with questions for spiritual reflection and discernment of next steps in each member's commitments to participate in God's mission, both within the church and outside it. This event took place during the season of Lent, 2017.

The fifth intervention spanned the entire length of the research period, in which the church elders were encouraged to participate in leading significant parts of the Sunday morning worship services. This participation included writing prayers and other parts of the liturgy, and leading these prayers and liturgies on Sunday mornings. This intervention culminated in a healing service led entirely by the church elders, during the season of Lent, 2017.

Population

The population studied in this project is the active membership of New Life Reformed Church who also meet the criteria of being over the age of eighteen. While there is no upper age limit, I was certain to screen participants in focus group interviews to ensure that no sensitive populations were invited to participate. The current active membership of New Life is 148 members, with ninety of those attending worship on a regular basis. Forty-five people completed the baseline questionnaire, and twenty-two people completed the end line questionnaire. Twelve people participated in the focus groups gathered after the interventions.

Instruments

The baseline and end line questionnaires and the focus group protocols were field tested by members of another Reformed church in the area.⁸ I engaged in a preliminary analysis of the data before and after each intervention and focus group gathering, to further develop the goals and design of the subsequent interventions, and in keeping with the AR design of the project.

The purpose of the questionnaires was to measure activity in the congregation based on participation in church activities outside of Sunday morning, giving patterns, and volunteerism outside the church. They also measured the level of optimism about the church, so that I could test for relationship between optimism about the church and the amount of time spent physically in the church building. I also collected demographic information to test for any significant impact gender, marital status, and household income might have on a person's participation in church activities.

The focus group protocol focused on the importance of the interventions in the lives of participants a week after the interventions. Group members were asked about what was most memorable for them, and about what they learned about themselves, the church, God, and their fellow church members. They were also asked for feedback about the processes of participation in the interventions, and what could be done to improve them in the future. Finally, group members were asked why they chose to attend the intervention rather than do something else, and to speculate as to why some other church members may not have made the same choice that they did.

⁸ These focus group protocols can be found in appendix D.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data in the questionnaires, I performed inferential and descriptive statistics using SPSS.⁹ I calculated mean scores for each of the Likert scale questions. I performed cross-tabulations and chi-square tests to test for significant relationships in categorical data, such as gender, age, household income, and the frequency of attendance at church functions. I performed independent t-tests and ANOVA tests to test the significance in relationships between optimism about the church and participation, as well as whether being a formal leader was an indicator of these attitudes and behaviors. Finally, I performed paired t-tests to test for significant changes in responses from the baseline questionnaire to the end line questionnaire. I asked each person to create a code—which is their date of birth and first initial—so I could pair the questionnaires for the paired t-test. For those who did not create a code, I attempted to match the IP address of the computer used to complete the questionnaire and demographic information to pair the questionnaires. This analysis shows whether there has been statistically significant change during the time of the study.

The qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded, with key terms, concepts, and trends being documented, according to Charmaz' approach to coding.¹⁰ I did initial coding on a word-by-word, line-by-line and concept-by-concept basis once the audio recordings were transcribed, resulting in *in vivo* codes.¹¹ I then did focused and axial coding, narrowing the *in vivo*

⁹ Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is a product owned by IBM. For more information, visit <https://www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics>.

¹⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116-128, 138-139.

codes to a few theoretical codes. I also created memos throughout the process of conducting focus groups and during the coding process to document emerging themes, keywords, and trends in the qualitative data.¹² Consent was given for the collection of these data through implied consent forms for the questionnaires and informed consent forms for the focus groups and interviews.¹³ Informed consent was received at the beginning of the group sessions and individual interviews.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the research methodology I used for this research project, and I described the qualitative and quantitative methods used to address the research question. AR effectively addressed the research question, and it was a wonderful way to involve the congregation in the transformational work I had hoped to accomplish through this study. In the next chapter, I discuss the results of this research in greater detail.

¹² Ibid., 169-170.

¹³ These forms can be found in appendix C.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS OF STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Chapter four provided a detailed description of the methodology used for this project. This chapter provides the results of the study, with reporting of interpretation of the data collected. My research question was as follows:

How might an Action Research intervention move congregation members towards playing an active role in the ministry of God, both within the church, and outside it?

The project was an AR project with baseline and end line questionnaires. There were five interventions, and three focus groups were conducted to discuss the impact of the interventions. Interviews were conducted with participants of the end line questionnaire to aid in the interpretation of the results. The study was conducted over a period of 10 months, from November of 2016 to September of 2017.

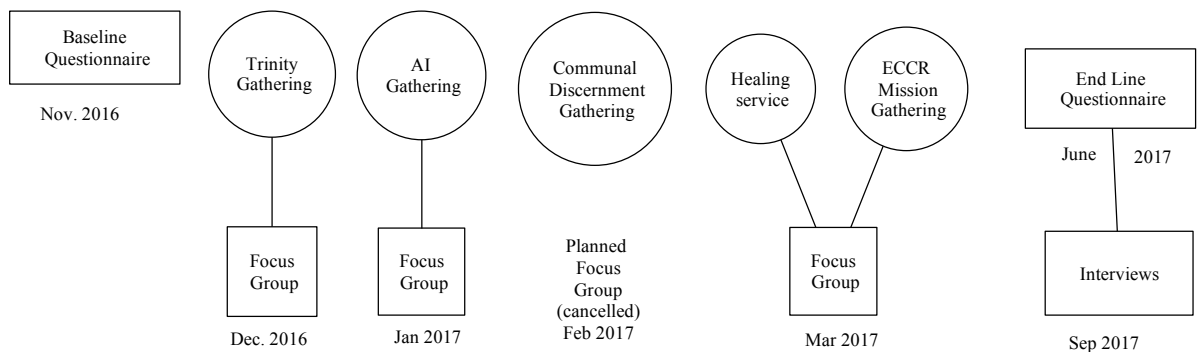


Figure 2. Research Project Timeline

Study Results

There were three distinct phases to this project. The first of the phases was a questionnaire that provided a baseline for the study.

Table 1. Baseline Questionnaire Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	13	28.9	28.9
Female	27	60.0	88.9
Not Specified	5	11.1	100.0
Total	45	100.0	

Forty-five people participated in the baseline questionnaire. Thirteen were men (28.9%), twenty-seven were women (60.0%), and five chose not to specify their gender (11.1%) (see Table 1).

The second phase of the project was a series of five AR interventions. The original plan for this study included a focus group following each intervention, but a total of three focus groups were conducted instead of the five originally planned.¹

The first intervention took place in December 2016. It was an education event focused on learning about the Trinity through Scripture, art, and playing with modeling dough. A focus group was conducted one week later. The group consisted of five volunteers who had participated in the intervention the previous week (see Table 2).

¹ One focus group was canceled due to inclement weather, and two of the interventions were on the same day, so a single focus group encompassed both of those interventions. See figure 1 for a visual representation of the overall timeline.

Table 2. Trinity Event Focus Group Participants

Name	Age
Barbara	34
Robert	70
Harriet	69
Connie	46
Nina	62

The second intervention took place in January 2017. It was a congregational gathering that focused on sharing personal and communal experiences of the church from the past, in the style of appreciative inquiry. Participants were invited to discuss positive aspects of the church in the past, as well as some wishes for the future. A focus group was conducted one week later. This group consisted of four volunteers who had participated in the intervention the previous week (see Table 3).

Table 3. Appreciative Inquiry Focus Group Participants

Name	Age
William	72
Vicki	58
Phil	50
Richard	78

The third intervention took place in February 2017. It was a congregational gathering that focused on reading Scripture and reflecting on God's call for the future of the church. Due to inclement weather, the planned focus group following this intervention was canceled.

The fourth and fifth interventions took place on the same day in March 2017. The fourth was a healing and prayer service conducted by the church elders during a Sunday

worship service, and the fifth was a worship gathering at a local residential facility for adults with severe developmental disabilities. Because many of the same people participated in these two interventions, a single focus group was conducted later that week, which was made up of the elders of the church (see Table 4).

Table 4. Healing Service Focus Group Participants

Name	Age
Connie	46
William	72
Frank	60
Edward	74
Jack	57

The third phase of this project was an end line questionnaire, which asked many of the same questions as the baseline questionnaire, in order to measure changes in congregational attitudes and behaviors over time. Twenty-two people participated in the end line questionnaire (see Table 5). Seven were men, twelve were women, and three responded “prefer not to say.” Following the completion of the end line questionnaire, three people were chosen for interviews from among eight who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed about their responses to the questionnaire and their experiences of the project as a whole (see Table 6). These interviews were conducted in September 2017.

Table 5. End Line Questionnaire Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	7	31.8	31.8
Female	12	54.5	86.3
Not Specified	3	13.6	100.0
Total	22	100.0	

Table 6. End Line Interview Participants

Name	Age
Sally	50-60
Richard	78
Margaret	65-75

Baseline Questionnaire Results

The baseline questionnaire asked participants to rate their optimism about the future of the church, as well as indicate their level of participation in church activities and whether or not they currently served in a leadership role. Most participants in the questionnaire were at least somewhat optimistic, with a mean response of 1.86. Almost 80% (79.6%) of respondents indicated being somewhat, very, or extremely optimistic about the future of New Life (see Table 7). Measuring this same response in the end line survey determined whether or not there was any change in the congregation's attitude about the church's future in the time of this study. Those end line results are discussed later in this chapter.

Table 7. Optimism About the Future of New Life Church

Level of Optimism	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Not at All Optimistic (1)	9	20.5	20.5
Somewhat Optimistic (2)	33	75.0	95.5
Very Optimistic (3)	1	2.3	97.7
Extremely Optimistic (4)	1	2.3	100.0
Total	44	100.0	
Mean: 1.86			

The purpose of the study was also to document a change in the congregation's volunteer activity outside the church, in the community. Just over half (53.3%) of respondents answered "yes" when asked if they presently volunteer their time in organizations other than the church. This can also be compared to the same question in the end line survey to measure any change in the congregation's practices following the time of the study.

I tested the responses about optimism about the church's future by conducting an ANOVA, to see whether demographic data were related to the responses. The ANOVA revealed no significance in the relationships for the following data (see Table 8). There were no significant relationships for these categories and optimism about the churches future, because none of the p-values were below .05.

Table 8. ANOVA Results for Optimism About New Life's Future

Category Title	F	p
Age	1.738	.175
Employment Status	1.927	.141
Number in Household	1.400	.258
Marital Status	2.147	.109
Household Income	1.441	.245

AR Intervention Data

There were five AR interventions, and a total of three focus groups were conducted to reflect on the interventions. Five focus groups were originally planned, but the plan was amended because of a weather-related cancellation of one group gathering and the combination of two interventions on the same day into a single focus group.

Advent Educational Event

The first intervention was a congregational gathering on a Sunday evening in the season of Advent that focused on teaching about the Trinity through the lens of Advent. Participants were invited to discuss around tables their thoughts about what it means for God to be a Trinity. They were given modeling clay to sculpt an image of what the Trinity means to them. Participants were then shown two artistic depictions of the Trinity: one a depiction by Luca Rossetti da Orta from 1738, and one a Russian Orthodox icon by Andrei Rublev from the 15th century. They were invited to share their thoughts on the differences between the two paintings, and what insight each painting gave to their understanding of God's identity. Each part of the evening had the participants in

conversation with others at their table, all while reflecting on the story of the angel visiting Mary in Luke 1.

Twenty-two congregation members participated in this intervention, and one week later, five of them participated in a focus group to reflect on their experience. The focus group was asked to reflect on how the event impacted their understanding of God, the church, their fellow church members, and the world in which they live. The following axial codes emerged from the focus group discussion: emerging understanding of the Trinity, the value of being together, importance of space and time to reflect, barriers to full participation, and responsibility.

Emerging Understanding of the Trinity

Much of the conversation centered on a comparison of the two paintings from a Western and Eastern Christian perspective, and how they tended to equate God with Jesus and mostly forget about the Holy Spirit. They also struggled with what language and words they wanted to use to describe God. They felt the tension between wanting to worship one God and yet consider the differences among the three persons, but they also emphasized how important it was for God to be actively working in the world. Harriet said, “Doesn’t it make you feel good to know that there are three people working for you, kind of strengthens your faith.”

The Value of Being Together

The focus group agreed that one of the keys to being a healthy, active church is spending time together. They focused on the rich conversations around the table and the way that eating together has a way of strengthening ties. Nina said, “I think the gatherings we have in church are good for each of us . . . it strengthens me when I’m with

other Christians.” Connie said, “It’s always nice to be able to share your faith and share good conversations, and some good food.” There was an overall sense from the group that they wished more people would attend events like this.

Importance of Space and Time to Reflect

One of the key insights from the group was that the act of gathering a week later to reflect on discussions from the event was helpful in processing and remembering what was said. Not much reflection takes place in the busy, fast-paced world that we live in. The act of being asked to reflect on the experience brought new meaning than was felt in the previous week. Connie said, “I’m not an extrovert, so my understanding of stuff comes afterwards in a digestive process . . . I didn’t really think about this stuff until afterwards.” She also stated that the focus group questions would be helpful to ask about other aspects of her life. Others agreed.

Barriers to Full Participation

The group was asked to reflect on the reasons why others might not have attended, or other things that they could have done instead of attending the gathering. This conversation brought forth insight into the busyness of their lives: caring for elderly parents, attending their kids’ activities, working around the house, running errands, or completing work tasks at home. There was also a sense from the focus group that those who did not attend the congregational gathering choose not to attend for many reasons, including being apathetic, lazy, intimidated by others who might know more than they do, or just not knowing the important things they are missing out on. The group felt that others might be more likely to participate if those who did participate talked more openly about the positive experience of being there.

Responsibility

There was a wide variety of feedback given from the focus group about their own responsibility as Christians in light of their understanding of God's identity. Participants talked about the importance of sharing one's faith, being the world's conscience, and being the ones to stop Satan's evil from running free in our world. I presented at the intervention the importance of identifying God's action in the world and our participation in that action, but that concept did not come up in the comments from the focus group. There was not a strong connection between what God does and what our responsibility is.

Appreciative Inquiry Gathering

The second intervention was a congregational gathering after worship on a Sunday morning to engage in appreciative inquiry of the church's past and reflection on our values and wishes for the future. Forty people participated in this gathering, divided into five groups. Each group was asked to list what they believed to be the core values of New Life Reformed Church, based on positive examples from the church's history. Then each group was asked to create a list of wishes for the future. There was remarkable similarity in the responses of the five groups: there were definite values demonstrated in the importance of worship and caring for one another, and the wishes of each group were that the church would grow, both in faithfulness and in number.

A focus group was created by selecting one person from each group to gather one week after the intervention. Four out of the five people selected chose to participate in the focus group. The group was asked to respond to the same set of questions as the previous focus group: their understanding of God, the church, their fellow members, and the community and world in which they live. The following axial codes emerged from the

focus group discussion: the merger, growing the church as a concern, and God is in control.

The Merger

The focus group participants agreed that the merger was a very positive aspect of the life of the church, and much of the conversation revolved around the work that went into bringing the two congregations together into one. Phil talked about how the other members in his group had all been a part of the other church, and how interesting it was to hear their past experiences. Richard said that he had been a part of the committee that brought the two churches together, and that the leaders from the churches had talked about what a merger would look like, but that the congregation had really not been a part of those conversations. The focus group also lamented that so much of what they had hoped would happen when the merger took place had not come to pass—namely growth in the number of church members.

Growing the Church is a Concern

All of the focus group participants agreed that there is a need to grow the church, and that this showed up in all five of the group feedback reports. But while the need to grow the congregation is felt, there is frustration around not knowing what to do. Richard said that when the merger took place, there was a ten-year window in which the church would either succeed or fail. We are getting close to the end of that period, and the group agreed that the church is unclear about whose responsibility it is.

“God is in Control—What should we do?”

The group participants talked about the theological tension in believing that God is in control and that we have a role to play as church members. Richard said, “It’s great to say ‘I’m handing it to the Lord and he’ll take care of this,’ by the same token the church is an answer to the Lord’s request that we be a responsive people, so what is the Lord asking us to do in this?” The participants overwhelmingly sensed that God is with the church, yet at the same time there is a disconnect between God’s action and the action of the church. This is experienced as an either/or relationship: either God acts or they act.

A Major Intervening Variable

The Consistory had been considering budget reductions for over a year, and just before the study began, they decided that reduction of staff would take place in the summer of 2017. A letter detailing these anticipated changes was mailed to the congregation in January of 2017, between the second and third planned interventions. Included in this round of staff reductions were the minister of congregational care, the director of youth ministry (who was also a church member), and a change in the office staff (who were also church members). This course of events had a profound impact on the results of this research.

Communal Discernment Gathering

The third intervention was a congregational gathering after worship on a Sunday where participants were asked to reflect on a passage of Scripture, answering questions about what God is doing and what God wants to do. The gathering time was divided into two parts: dwelling in the Word and dwelling in the world. Participants divided into groups of four or five and read from Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats.

They were first asked to reflect on words, phrases, or ideas that stood out to them or caught their attention, and then reflected on what the passage says about God and about us. The participants then read the passage again and focused more on the condition of the world, reflecting on what action God might have them take in light of what God is already doing. At the end, following a time of prayer and reflection on what the different groups had written down, each person was invited to put a sticker next to the statements that they felt resonated most strongly with what God was saying.

The statements that had the most stickers next to them were “God wants us to live out our faith,” “pray,” and “love each other.” There were not many stickers next to statements about what God is doing; these statements included “God is presenting us with many challenges,” and “God is disciplining the church and the world.” Upon further reflection on these responses with the Consistory, there was clearly not a strong connection between God’s action and what we are called to do—as a church and as individuals.

A focus group was planned following this intervention, but inclement weather caused it to be postponed, and it was never rescheduled. The Consistory reflected briefly on the experience, and they noted that the congregation was out of practice with this sort of exercise, and that more communal discernment of God’s direction for the church was warranted in the future.

Healing Service

The fourth intervention was a prayer service for healing that was led by the church elders during one of the Sundays in the season of Lent. The five church elders received prayer requests from the congregation, led a liturgy focused on healing, and then

invited congregation members to come forward for laying on of hands and anointing with oil. The two ministers remained seated in the congregation during this entire portion of the service. The five elders then participated in a focus group a few days later. This focus group combined the healing service intervention with the fifth intervention, a worship service at a local facility for developmentally disabled adults.

Missional Service Trip

The fifth intervention was a worship event at a local facility for developmentally disabled adults that the church will be having a close relationship with in the future. Participants were invited to travel to this facility and interact with the residents, then join in worship together with them. Seven church members participated in this activity, including two church elders. These elders participated in a focus group following this intervention, along with the other elders who had led the healing service.

This focus group was asked a similar set of questions that had been posed to the two previous focus groups: how did these interventions impact their understanding of God, themselves, their fellow church members, and the community and world in which they live. All five elders were present for the focus group, and the following axial codes emerged from their discussion: responsibility and participation in God's mission, uncomfortable and unprepared, and lack of participation.

Responsibility and Participation in God's Mission

Each of the participants spoke of the sense of weight, or responsibility, that they felt in leading the healing service. The feeling they described as almost sacramental in nature, and they felt deeply moved by the awesome responsibility of praying for another person and being the presence of Jesus Christ to them. They compared the feeling to what

is felt in serving communion to someone in their home. The presence of God was also felt strongly. Frank said, “You’re seeing them [congregation members] be touched by the Holy Spirit, certainly not touched by us, but through the activity that we’re a part of, that you’re actually making a difference in someone’s spiritual journey, which, to me, it does make a much more profound impact of the role than simply being an elder in many other duties.” I got a sense from these elders of the connection between God’s work and their participation in that work.

Uncomfortable and Unprepared

The off-site mission experience left the elders unprepared for the level of need that would be present there, and uncomfortable and dissatisfied with their own reactions to that need. Connie said that being outside of her comfort zone is where she experiences the most growth, but she was disappointed in herself in feeling sorry for the people in the facility: “I felt like I did a very big disservice to them, because I was just, there were so many people that I didn’t get to hear enough stories to make me not feel sorry for them, so for me, I think what would be beneficial in a situation, not that I wouldn’t want to participate, but I would love to get to know a smaller group . . . I was just overwhelmed.” One of the members of the church works there as a physical therapist, and the participants lifted her up as an example of someone who was living out her faith, knowing the residents of the facility at a level that the elders wish they could get to.

Lack of Participation

The participants reflected on the fact that there were many who did not participate in either the healing service or the mission experience, either because they were not able to or because they chose not to. Many of the people that are on the church’s prayer list

each week are homebound or hospitalized, and would not be able to travel to the church for the healing service. It is also quite telling that forty church members will participate in a gathering at the church with other church members, but only seven are willing to go off-site for mission work. Participants noted that this is a similar number that has turned out for other mission experiences like build days with Habitat for Humanity. Even getting people to come to the church on a different day of the week than Sunday for a Bible study or other event proves difficult. Sunday morning worship is the only activity that many members of New Life have shown a willingness to participate in.

A summary of the axial codes from each of the focus groups is found in Table 9. The axial codes can be further grouped into the three theoretical codes as presented in Table 10.

Table 9. Focus Group Axial Codes

AC1 Emerging Understanding of the Trinity
AC2 Value of Being Together
AC3 Barriers to Full Participation
AC4 Responsibility
AC5 Merger
AC6 Growing the Church
AC7 “God is in Control—What Should We Do?”
AC8 Participation in God’s Mission
AC9 Uncomfortable and Unprepared
AC10 Lack of Participation

Table 10. Theoretical Codes

TC1 Who God Is	TC2 What We Do	TC3 What Hinders Us
AC1 Emerging Understanding of the Trinity	AC2 Being Together	AC3 Barriers to Full Participation
AC7 God Is In Control	AC4 Responsibility	AC6 Growing the Church
	AC5 Merger	AC9 Uncomfortable and Unprepared
	AC8 Participation in God's Mission	AC10 Lack of Participation

The general observation I have from all the interventions and focus groups is that the congregation does not have a clear understanding of the relationship of what God is doing to what we are called to do, and there is much that stands in the way of that relationship being cultivated. A diagram helps in describing how these theoretical codes are related (see figure 3).

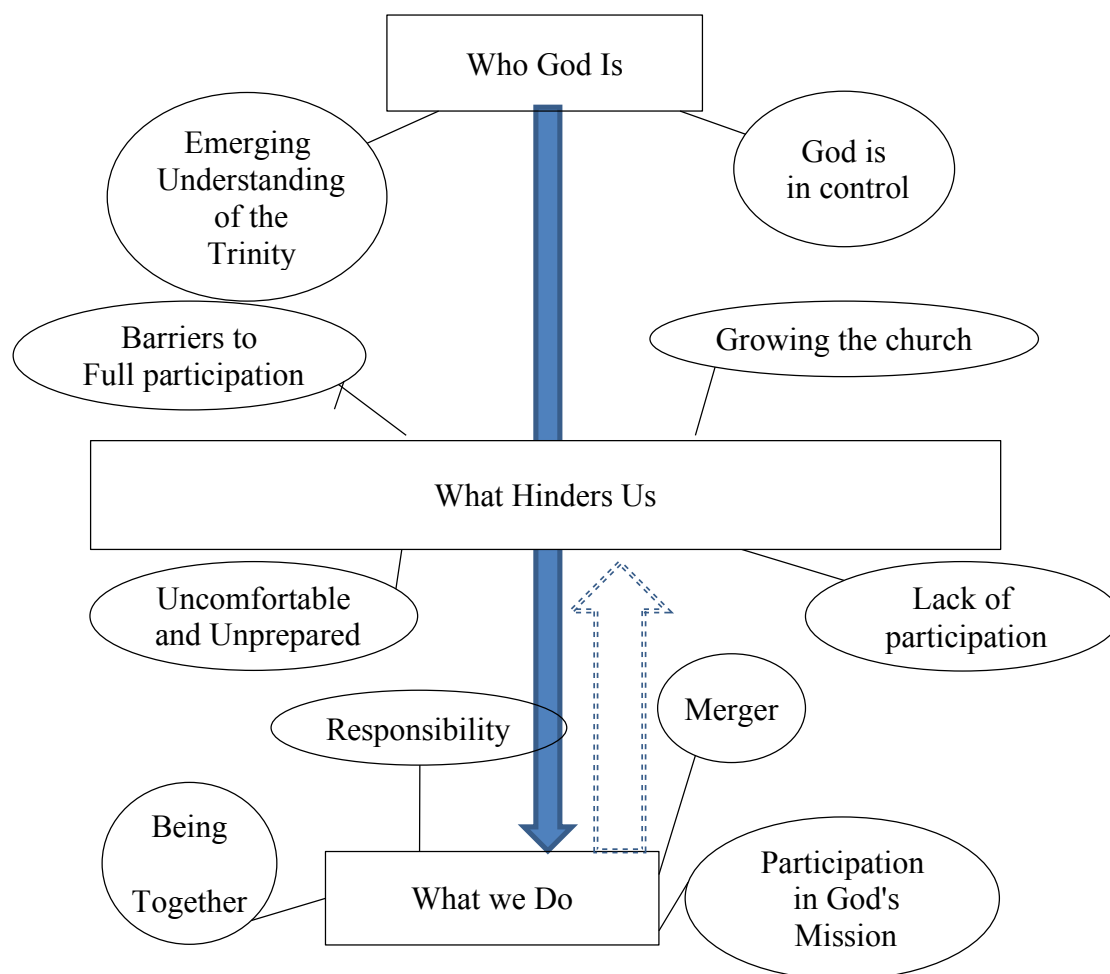


Figure 3. Theoretical Code Relationships

End Line Questionnaire Data

I administered an end line questionnaire to measure change in the congregation at the conclusion of the study period. There were far fewer participants in the end line questionnaire than there were in the baseline, which can be partially explained by the fact that the end line was administered in June, which is part of the summer season for New

Life. The baseline had been administered in November, which is at the beginning of the season when the most people are engaged in church activities.²

The end line questionnaire asked the same question about optimism about the future of New Life Reformed Church as the baseline, with a similar mean average of 2.14, which is between “Somewhat Optimistic” and “Very Optimistic” on the scale (see Table 11).

Table 11. How Optimistic Are You about the Future of this Church? (End Line Independent Data)

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Not at All Optimistic (1)	3	14.3	14.3
Somewhat Optimistic (2)	14	66.7	81.0
Very Optimistic (3)	2	9.5	90.5
Extremely Optimistic (4)	2	9.5	100.0
Total	21	100.0	
Mean: 2.14			

Respondents were also asked to respond to how their level of optimism had changed over the last six months, to quantify how their own perceptions had changed and to compare how their response actually matched up to the data. The mean average response was 2.62, which was between “I am slightly less optimistic about the church’s future” and “My optimism about the future has not changed” (see Table 12).

² See tables 1 and 5 for information on participants in the questionnaires.

Table 12. How Has Your Level of Optimism about the Future of the Church Changed in the Last 6 Months? (End Line Independent Data)

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Much less optimistic (1)	4	19.0	19.0
Slightly less optimistic (2)	6	28.6	47.6
Unchanged (3)	6	28.6	76.2
Slightly more optimistic (4)	4	19.0	95.2
Much more optimistic (5)	1	4.8	100.0
Total	21	100.0	
Mean: 2.62			

Analysis of just those participants who responded to both the baseline and end line questionnaires yielded similar results. The mean for this group in the baseline was 2.00 (somewhat optimistic), and for the end line the mean was 2.27. A paired t-test for this question showed that there is no statistical difference in the response from the baseline to the end line, $N=15$, $t_{(14)}=-1.740$, $p=.104$. The average response for this group to a change in the level of optimism over the last six months was 2.93, or almost no change (see Table 13).

Respondents were asked what factors contributed to any change in their level of optimism, and most of the responses had to do with fiscal responsibility, budget cuts, staff reductions, and declining church attendance. What I find interesting is that changes in optimism seem to be linked to whether a person agreed with the financial decisions that were made. The three people that were interviewed in connection with the end line questionnaire each stated different reasons for their change in optimism: one person was happy with more emphasis placed on volunteerism in the congregation, another regretted

the changes that needed to be made, and a third spoke of no connection between optimism about the church and these structural changes; her optimism about the church was tied to a deep sense of God's presence in her life and in the life of the church.

End line questionnaire respondents' optimism about the future of the church was independent from the demographic information collected, just as it was in the baseline questionnaire. The data demonstrate that there is no significant relationship between these demographic factors and a respondent's optimism about the church, because none of the p-values were less than .05 (see Table 14)

Table 13. Change in Level of Optimism over the Last 6 Months (Paired Responses--End Line)

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Much Less Optimistic (1)	1	6.7	6.7
Slightly Less Optimistic (2)	4	26.7	33.3
No Change (3)	6	40.0	73.3
Slightly More Optimistic (4)	3	20.0	93.3
Much More Optimistic (5)	1	6.7	100.0
Total	15	100.0	
Mean: 2.93			

I tested the responses of those who completed both the baseline and end line questionnaires for factors that had an effect on optimism about the future and attendance at church activities. The only significant relationship I discovered was for those who attended at least one of the AR intervention (see tables 14 and 15).

Table 14. ANOVA Results for Optimism About the Church's Future (End Line Independent Data)

Category Title	F score	p-value (significance)
Gender	.129	.942
Age	1.002	.416
Employment Status	.138	.936
Marital Status	1.396	.278
Household Income	1.629	.220
Leader in the Church?	.179	.909

Table 15. Independent t-test Results: Attending at least One Intervention vs. Attending None (Paired Group)³

Question	χ_1 (N ₁)	χ_0 (N ₀)	t	df	p
How optimistic are you about the future of this church?	2.63 (9)	1.67 (6)	2.526	13	.025
How has your level of optimism about the future of this church changed in the last 6 months?	3.11 (9)	2.67 (6)	.806	13	.435
In the past 6 months, how frequently have you attended worship services at this church?	3.44 (9)	3.29 (7)	.345	14	.735

³ Interpretive Key for t-test Results:

N is the total number of responses

χ is the mean

df is the degrees of freedom

1 and 0 subscripts: attending at least one intervention and zero interventions, respectively

p is the probability two-tailed. With bold font: statistically significant relationship ($p < .05$)

Table 15. Independent t-test Results: Attending at least One Intervention vs. Attending None (Paired Group) (cont.)

Question	χ_1 (N_1)	χ_0 (N_0)	t	df	p
How important is the Christian faith in your life?	3.78 (9)	3.00 (7)	3.063	14	.008
Do you presently volunteer your time in organizations other than the church?	1.33 (9)	1.57 (7)	-.917	14	.375

There is a statistical difference in the questions “How optimistic are you about the future of this church?”, $t_{(13)}=2.526$, $p=.025$, and “How important is the Christian faith in your life?”, $t_{(14)}=3.063$, $p=.008$, for those who attended at least one of the AR interventions and those who attended none. This means that a respondent’s attendance at an intervention and their optimism about the future and the importance of their faith were related in some way.

I performed a paired t-test for these two questions to test whether there was a statistically significant difference in the individual responses from the beginning of the study to the end (see Table 16). The responses to these two questions were slightly more positive in the baseline than in the end line, but the difference was not statistically significant, because the p-value was greater than .05. This result leads me to the conclusion that people who are more optimistic about the future of the church were more likely to attend one of the interventions, as opposed to the interventions themselves producing greater optimism in the respondents.

Table 16. Paired t-test Comparing Baseline and End Line Responses of Those Who Attended at least One Intervention

Question	χ_b (N_b)	χ_e (N_e)	t	df	p
How optimistic are you about the future of this church?	2.22 (9)	2.67 (9)	-1.835	8	.104
How important is the Christian faith in your life?	3.67	3.78	-.555	8	.594

Interpretation of Results

One of my hopes in conducting these AR interventions was to document a change in the congregation's attitudes and behaviors as it concerned participation in ministry in the church and in the community. I did not know at the outset that the staff changes the church was considering would begin to be implemented during the course of the study, and given the comments from of the questionnaires, that intervening variable had a greater effect on the results than any of the interventions did.

The feedback from the focus groups centered much more on content of the interventions, as was their intention. It is clear from these conversations that more work is needed in shaping the congregation's vision around what God is doing and what the congregation is called to do as a result. The intense focus on what is happening inside the church, along with the concern about growing the church, points to a survival mentality

and attitude that prevents the congregation from focusing on God's mission. The formal leaders of the congregation understand this reality about the church to a greater extent than does the rest of the congregation.

It would be worthwhile to conduct another questionnaire when more time has elapsed since the staffing reductions, so that the congregation's participation in ministry could be measured again. I have already seen greater participation in some of the ministries within the church, along with some promising moves towards engaging in mission activities outside the church. The staffing changes would nearly function as an additional intervention if more time were allotted for this project.

Conclusion

This chapter provided the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data collected for this project. There was some change documented, but that change came about largely as a result of intervening variables that were outside my control as the researcher. The qualitative data from the interventions provided a theoretical framework for future action in developing change in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the congregation. Chapter six provides a discussion of this analysis viewed through the lenses described in chapters two and three of this thesis.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

How might an Action Research intervention move congregation members towards playing an active role in the ministry of God, both within the church, and outside it?

This was the question that formed the basis of this research project. Chapter five provided details of the results of the research, giving analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data that were collected. This chapter provides the conclusions that are drawn from that analysis, viewed through the lenses presented in chapters two and three.

The research question was the engine for the interventions, but rather than answering the question, the research instead presented some key insights into the next steps of development in the mission and ministry of the church. Figure 2 presented these insights in picture form. The first section of this chapter presents them in light of the lens of adaptive change.

Adaptive Change Theory

Heifetz and Linsky write about the difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges in their book *Leadership on the Line*, as first presented in chapter two of this thesis.¹ Technical challenges are problems that can be easily identified, with solutions discovered from resources and knowledge already present in an organization.

¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 14.

Adaptive challenges are more difficult to identify, and they require new knowledge and resources that are not currently present in the organization. Adaptive change usually requires new learning and new ways of thinking and acting—nothing short of cultural change.

The data collected from the focus groups in this project helped me to identify ongoing adaptive challenges for New Life Reformed Church, as illustrated in figure 4. The figure is taken from the center of figure 3, which described the relationships between theoretical codes. Each of the four ovals names an adaptive challenge for the church to work on in the future, in order that church members might more fully participate in the mission of God.

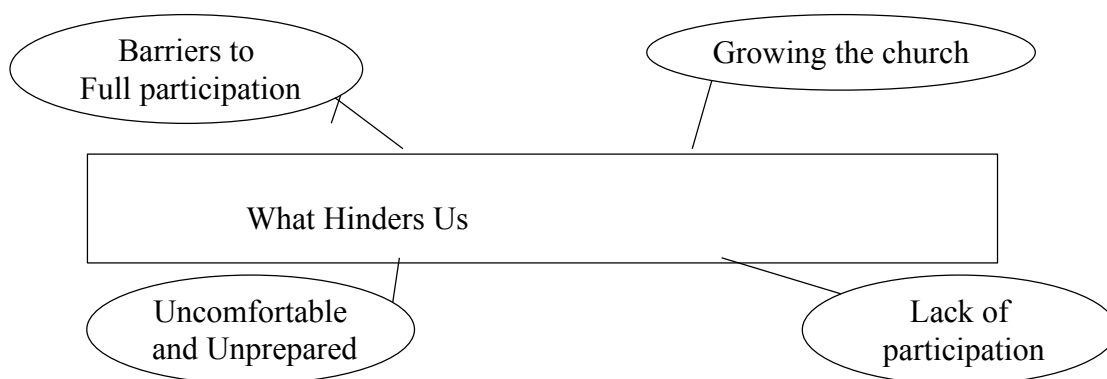


Figure 4. Adaptive Challenges for New Life Reformed Church

Barriers to Full Participation

The members of New Life are busy people. They work long hours in order to afford to live the lives they live. They have kids who are involved in many different activities. They have aging parents for whom they have to provide care and support, not to mention the fact that there is grocery shopping, laundry, cooking, and cleaning to be

done. Other members are older and have more difficulty getting around than they used to. They find it difficult to drive at night. It takes more effort to get from place to place. There are illnesses to contend with. These factors for all members are part of the fabric of living in northern New Jersey in the year 2017, and the church has difficulty competing with these other things in the lives of people.

Those who participated in interviews and focus groups named all of these factors—and more—as barriers to fully participating in the church’s ministries, as well as being barriers to volunteering in their communities. Most responded that they would love to volunteer more if they had more time, but the lack of time seems to be the biggest barrier to that participation.

A technical solution to this challenge would be to attempt to schedule church activities and volunteer opportunities at times that are convenient; create a survey to ask about the best time to hold a Bible study or to do a mission project with Habitat for Humanity; and select the time that works the best for the most people, and then sit back and wait for people to attend. I know these steps because I have tried them before, and, as with most technical solutions, they fail to address the core challenge. People do not want one more thing added into their busy schedules, even if that box on the calendar happens to be open.

This project helped me to identify the adaptive nature of this challenge, and how it is part of the culture of the place in which we live. Cultural change takes time, new learning, and experimentation. Admitting that there is no easy answer to this challenge is the first step in addressing it. Taking more time, through relationship building, to understand the nature of stress and anxiety that is caused by the busyness of life on one

hand, and the physical limitations of life on the other, is a further step in the direction of changing lives. This change comes through helping people to interpret their lives and their activities through the lens of God's activity in the world. Our members do not need to add more things to their calendars. They need help to understand their lives as participation in God's mission.

Uncomfortable and Unprepared

Focus group participants spoke of feelings of inadequacy in thinking theologically or engaging in ministry activities, both within the church and outside of it. Inviting participants to think about their actions today in light of God's actions—as demonstrated both in Scripture and in current events—was not something they had much experience with. This points to another adaptive challenge: a sense that ministry is best left to professionals (including ministers and lay ministry staff).

The challenge of being uncomfortable and feeling unprepared for participation in God's mission points to deeply held cultural beliefs in the church that date back decades. Responsibility for ministries was left to paid staff people. There was not much that happened in the church that was not being led by someone being paid for that work. The paid staff simply performed the ministry activities much of the time, and things happened at the church whether or not the congregation participated.

The current ministry realities for New Life of a smaller budget and fewer paid staff are helping to address this adaptive challenge. There is more participation required for ministry in the absence of paid staff, and the focus for paid and volunteer ministry leaders alike is on training and empowerment of others. This leadership is less focused on doing ministry and more focused on inviting others to participate. Through the creation of

opportunities for service and learning in new contexts, the congregation learns through doing, thereby feeling more prepared and more comfortable engaging in ministry. This is beginning to happen in small ways already.

Lack of Participation

Data from focus groups and inventories suggest that there is a significant portion of the congregation of New Life that is not interested in participating in the life of the church outside of Sunday morning worship. They like being with others from the congregation, but the worship service fills their felt needs, and so they see no need to be a part of small groups, Bible studies, or service projects. There are other things that they would rather spend time and energy doing.

There is no easy answer to the challenge of motivating members for ministry that only come to church to have their needs, wants, or desires met. This is an adaptive challenge for many other organizations as well, who are seeing active participation in their organizations on the decline. Robert Putnam writes about this decline in social capital in *Bowling Alone*.² Peter Block and John McKnight address this consumer mentality from a slightly different angle in *The Abundant Community*.³ Each of these books diagnose the challenge in modern society of consumer culture.⁴ People come to church for their spiritual or religious services, just like they would go to a grocery store for their food needs or an electronics store for a new TV.

² Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 65-79.

³ McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 7.

⁴ See chapter two of this thesis for more in-depth information on the lens of consumerism and social capital.

The AR interventions in this project sought to involve everyone in the church, but they were not enticing enough to include many who do not already participate in many things. Perhaps in future gatherings and interventions there will be growing numbers of participants, which in turn might apply the social pressure necessary to connect these members more meaningfully to their faith development and participating in God's work. Another possible next step for these members would be to discover gifts and passions in them that were previously unknown, and tap into something deep within them that might serve as a call to action. New ministries might blossom out of these newly discovered passions in much the same way as community organizations spring up through the shared passions of neighbors.

This segment of the congregation is the most difficult to understand through the data, as their lack of participation in the interventions and focus groups means that their voices and perspectives are not present. An opportunity for future research would be to study the congregation over a longer period of time, with interventions focused specifically on those who do not normally participate beyond Sunday morning, in order to discover gifts, talents, and passions in them to further their practice of Christian ministry.

Growing the Church

"I want the church to grow" was a statement that came from each of the small groups during the appreciative inquiry intervention. The groups were asked what three wishes they had for the church, and a sentiment around growth was one of those wishes. The focus group conducted after this intervention stated that, while "everyone" wants the church to grow, "no one" knows how to do it.

The church's growth—or lack of growth—was also found in some of the comments on the end line questionnaire. A few of the respondents to that questionnaire stated that they were less optimistic about the church because there were fewer people now than there were before (no time increment was noted in the before and after). Conversations I have had with church members about membership growth—both prior to and after the formal research—have normally also considered the financial ramifications of more or fewer members. The conversation is often spiritualized, with a desire for more people to know Jesus, but the underlying motivations are clear: we need more money, so we need more people.

This emphasis on our actions convincing people to come to our church is a major adaptive challenge, since it seems to be embedded into the culture of the church. It has to do with where the church is putting its energy and resources. The emphasis was on employing a great staff to attract new members in the first years following the merger. Not many new members were attracted, the money began to dry up, and now—out of necessity—we need to do something different. The technical solution was to decrease the staff, lowering the budget. The adaptive challenge that remains is changing the mindset of the people, helping them to understand the central theology of the church in a new light. I explore this more in the following section on the lens of missional theology.

Conclusions on Adaptive Change

The data collected for this project help in understanding the adaptive challenges the church faces. The challenges are attitudes and behaviors that keep church members from fully experiencing the connection between God's activity in the world and the ways in which we are invited to participate in that action. We emphasize our own action (or

inaction), or we fail to think highly enough of ourselves that God has given us spiritual gifts and passions to be used in ministry. This does not diminish the reality of who God is, what God is doing, and how God is inviting us to serve. The next section of this chapter explores the data through the theological lenses of missional theology, Trinitarian theology, and spiritual practices.

Missional and Trinitarian Theology

Dr. Daniel Anderson has said on many occasions, “God is. God has a mission. God’s mission has a church.” Figure 5 illustrates this using concepts from the collected data for this project. This section explains the theoretical codes *Who God Is* and *What We Do* through the lenses of missional and Trinitarian theology.

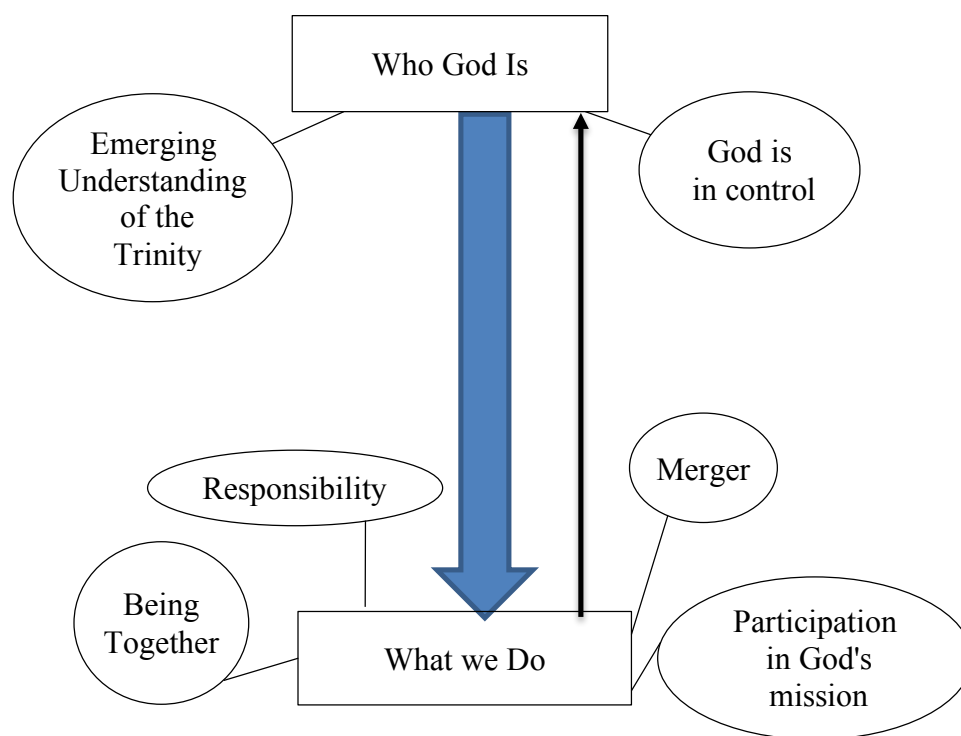


Figure 5. The Relationship Between God's Work and Our Response

Who God Is

The first intervention focused on educating participants on the subject of Trinity from Eastern and Western Christian perspectives. Participants were invited to reflect on Scripture and art in beginning to articulate a renewed understanding of God's Trinitarian nature. The subsequent focus group demonstrated an emerging understanding of the Trinity, which came about through being asked a series of questions that dove deeper into their thoughts and articulations of God.

One focus group participant demonstrated a deeper grasp of the concept than the others. This participant was also able to more clearly articulate her sense of call and ministry as being connected and related to God's guidance and God's grace. This understanding did not come from just a single intervention; she has been deeply invested in the ministry of the church for many years, and serves as a model for what each member could be and do if they were able to have this understanding of God's identity.

Chapter three of this thesis provides the literature review for these theological lenses, but, in short, Trinitarian theology focuses on how the three persons of God relate to one another and how the three persons relate to the rest of creation. Missional theology focuses on God as the primary actor or agent in the ongoing act of creation and mission, and the church or people of God being invited to participate in God's action. The church reflects the Trinitarian nature of God, created to be a diverse community of people working cooperatively and lovingly towards the goal of reflecting the kingdom of God to the world. The extent to which we faithfully live into this identity is the extent to which we find true meaning and purpose in our lives.

Another theme that came through in focus group conversations was a sense of God's sovereignty, that God is ultimately in control of all that takes place in our church and in our community. There is still a disconnect between that understanding and the ramifications for our actions as Christians for most of the participants, but those who spoke of and demonstrated the clearest understanding and faith in this aspect of God also articulated the clearest connection of their faith to their action. One person interviewed after the end line questionnaire said, "I know and trust that God is in control, and that gives me the strength and encouragement to live my life for him. How can I not be optimistic about the church and about my life when I trust God?"

What We Do

Missional theology places the church's action as a response to God's action and invitation in the world. The data collected for this project that can be grouped under the umbrella of our action are here analyzed through the lens of missional theology and Trinitarian theology.

Merger

One of the ways participants in this study identified their action in response to God's action was in the merger of 2008. Participants in the appreciative inquiry intervention and the subsequent focus group spoke of the Holy Spirit's leading in conversations spanning several years, with the culmination being two churches combining into one body. There were certainly technical aspects to the decision to merge: declining membership in both congregations, dwindling financial resources, and a lack of ordained leadership for one of the churches; but the sense of God bringing these two congregations together was still very clear for those who participated in the research.

There was loss involved for both congregations in the decision to merge. One of the congregations had to give up their church building, the place where they had gotten married, had children baptized, and attended funeral services for loved ones. Both congregations gave up the autonomy of self-governance, willingly trusting in others to make decisions for the good of all involved, and in hopes that their ministry would be better together than if left separate. They were willing to live through the loss with the hope of a better future in mind. New Life church members counted those decisions as important faith-building milestones, proof of the movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

Different groups of people gathered around a common purpose into one body is a reflection of the Trinitarian God. Submitting to one another for the good of all is foundational to understanding God's identity as Trinity. As New Life has lived out its shared life together, the reality of the merger has continued to be foundational to its identity. Speaking theologically about the Trinitarian reflection of that merger may help the church members live out their lives of faith in deeper, more faithful ways, understanding their shared life as leading them into the invitation of God to participate in God's mission in the world.

Being Together

Another reflection of Trinitarian theology in the practices of New Life is in their affection for one another when they gather, either for worship or for other events, especially when food is involved. I drew upon their enjoyment of gathering together in planning the interventions as congregational gatherings, and while knowing there would be deep conversations had some hesitant to participate, their mutual affection for one

another was powerful enough that each of the interventions had good overall participation numbers. The congregation comes from different towns, with a variety of ages and socioeconomic status, but they value each other and are able to see Christ in one another's presence.

The challenge—missionally speaking—is to find a way to connect the love they have for one another with a desire to know (and be known) by the neighboring community. The Trinitarian God has open space at the table, and bids others come and participate in their presence. The New Life community does not yet possess the imagination to understand themselves as an open community who seek relationship with those who are not currently present with them. Their own self-perception is one of being welcoming, but the expectation is that others will come to them. Most congregation members do not own a responsibility for knowing other people outside the church.

The exceptions to this statement of insularity are those members who demonstrate the strongest connection between their understanding of who God is and what they do in participation in God's mission. Interviews and focus group participation pointed towards a deeper understanding of the role that each member is to play in connecting the church to others in the community. Next steps for continuing to develop that belief among broader participation in the congregation are to empower them to develop experiments in ministry where the congregation is placed face-to-face with strangers, together working towards a common solution to a community problem, such as the growing opioid use epidemic in our region. Learning to harness the Trinitarian reflection in gathering together could be a major breakthrough for the missional imagination of New Life.

Responsibility

One of the interesting conversations that came out of one of the focus groups was how God's sovereignty relates to the church's responsibility. One member said that we know that God is in control and will take care of our church, that God will do whatever God is going to do as it concerns our church and our community, and yet we—the church—still have some responsibility for our ministry. The group acknowledged that they were not sure what that responsibility was, and that it would require further discernment to gain understanding.

The theme of responsibility came through in other conversations as well. The focus group after the healing service talked about the feeling of heaviness at the responsibility of praying for people and asking God to heal them. People were coming forward, vulnerable, asking to be anointed with oil, and these elders felt the responsibility of caring for them.

This is a wonderful illustration of the participation of people in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The elders recognize that God does the healing, but their physical touch and the act of voicing prayers to God on the congregation's behalf was tangible and meaningful, to the congregation and to themselves. They came away with a different understanding of what it is to care for people through that participation, and felt an even greater sense of responsibility to follow God's leading in other ministries.

Participation in God's Mission

Participation in God's mission is at the very center of missional theology, and it was an emerging theme among interviewees and focus group participants. Some were able to articulate this in the language of missional theology better than others, but this has

clearly been an area of growth and development in the time of the study. The ability to articulate the church's ministry in light of God's mission will be a key area of emphasis as the church continues to address the adaptive challenges mentioned above.

Questions of Leadership?

One of the interesting findings from the data collection for this project was the lack of feedback given regarding the place of leadership in the past, present, and future of New Life church. There were comments about the changes in staffing as a reflection of optimism about the future of the church, but not about the impact of current leaders, styles, and structures on the life of the church as it exists today. This lack of information may point to the implicit cultural assumptions regarding the nature of church leadership today.

Other conversations I have had about leadership in New Life have focused on a previous minister of one of the churches, someone who was pastor of that church for over thirty years. He was admired and respected, and most stories about him reflect a centralized leadership model in which he would cast a vision for ministry, then personally oversee almost all implementation of that ministry. People in these conversations often speak of a good leader as someone who, like Moses, climbs the mountain to speak with God about the direction of the church, then comes back down the mountain to inform the people about what God wants them to do. The church began to drift in terms of mission and vision once that pastor retired, and that drift was one of the things that led to openness regarding the merger.

This leadership style may seem effective while the leader is present, but once the leader is gone, it becomes clear that the energy behind the ministry was not fully owned

by the people, because they did not share ownership in it. Missional leadership, by contrast, involves the shared ownership and discernment of the vision for God's mission by the formal leader together with a broader segment of the congregation. That means continued opportunities to gather and reflect through the practices of Dwelling in the Word and Dwelling in the World, and experimenting in ministry until the congregation finds its place in the community and is energized by the experience of participating in God's mission.

Another role of leadership for the future of New Life will be to help the congregation discover a new way to tell its story. Bolman and Deal write in *Reframing Organizations* about the symbolic frame, the symbols, artifacts, and narratives that define an organization.⁵ The core of the story of New Life that gets told is about the organizational reality of the merger, now ten years in the past. Helping the people to reframe their story in terms of their identity as one church, as one body, and to tell the story of God's faithfulness and movement in their midst in the intervening years, will be a key leadership task for the near future.

The work of leadership then becomes interpretive work. The congregation can talk about the things that they have done. They have cared for one another. They have fed the homeless. They have financially supported missionaries. They are in the process of partnering with a group home for people with developmental disabilities. They have begun to participate in building houses with Habitat for Humanity. The emphasis in each of these statements is on what *they* have done. The interpretive work of missional leadership is to help them imagine *God's* action in the midst of their own. God

⁵ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 248-263.

commands the people in exile to seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29). Could our action with Habitat for Humanity and feeding the homeless be considered a response to that command? God asked Ezekiel if dry bones could live, and then commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, that they might come alive. Could our work with developmentally disabled adults be considered a part of the work of bringing dry bones back to life? That is the work of missional leadership: to help people understand their stories through the lens of God's story.

Jesus sent his followers into the surrounding communities, as told in Luke 10, to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. As the members of New Life begin to discover the intersection of their lives with God's story, they might begin to see themselves being sent by Christ into the communities that they are a part of, practicing hospitality, and being bearers of the peace of Christ. This is at the heart of what it is to be a missional church: having been formed by Christ, and having our identities centered in the triune God, we are sent into the world to bear witness to what God has done in us and in the world in which we live.

Conclusion

This project began with a concern about moving people towards more active participation in God's ministry. The interventions did not produce conclusive results about an increase in participation in church functions, but the data did contain helpful markers for future research. Further focus on connecting the theology of the congregation with their practices, and learning to tell that story in a new way, will be the kinds of experimentation that might make a difference for the future of New Life. Further research

might also be conducted in the relative calm that is now present, at least as it relates to the stability of staffing.

This project was conducted in a particular congregation in northern New Jersey, and the results and conclusions may not be universally applied to all congregations. It would be reasonable to conclude that churches of a similar size, from a similar tradition, in a similar context might experience similar outcomes if the same interventions were applied. The underlying theological conclusions in this thesis are more universally applicable. Taking the time to discern God's work in the world and making a conscious decision to participate in that work results in meaning, excitement, and fulfillment, no matter who a person is or where the person is from.

I wrote in the introductory chapter to this thesis that "great members make great churches." Much literature about churches is focused on leadership and makes assumptions that the leaders are what make the difference in a congregation. This project has illustrated that when the members of a church are excited about their faith, and they are able to connect that faith to the rest of their lives, that the church they are a part of is better because of it.

EPILOGUE

This thesis is part of a project and program that has been four years in the making. The church I serve has been through some incredibly challenging times, and has endured some difficult changes. I have also changed as a leader during this time. These final pages of the thesis describe some of what I have learned and how I have been changed.

Personal Growth and Development

The process of undertaking a doctoral program like this one has had a major impact on me in a number of different areas. I have experienced new levels of organization and focus by zeroing in on a specific research question, doing extensive reading and research on that narrow subject matter, then organizing questionnaires, interventions, focus groups, and a mountain of data into something that resembles a coherent argument.

Conducting the interventions, focus groups, and interviews has given me new insight and greater appreciation of the serious things church members wrestle with every day. They have also helped me to be more sensitive to the ways people can be weighed down by things that might be important to me from a church organization perspective, but will not help a person's faith to grow or help to give them a greater spiritual connection with God. This is my full-time work, but for many of them, it is volunteer work, and they have limited time. I am trying more each day to maximize the impact of the time that church members are spending at the church, while also equipping them to understand the rest of their lives as an extension of their faith and ministry.

I owe a large debt of gratitude to my colleagues in this program, from whom I have learned so much. Hearing about their joys and challenges in their congregations has helped me to think through more clearly about the way I approach ministry at New Life. Hearing about life in the Lutheran tradition has also helped me to think through the finer points of the Reformed tradition, and that has been a great exercise for my own faith development.

Impacts on My Approach to Leadership and Ministry

The research, writing, and overall program for this D.Min. degree has significantly changed my approach to church leadership and ministry. Almost every leadership book I had read prior to being a part of this program prescribed the same course of action for leaders: develop a compelling vision, cast that vision, get people to buy in, inspire them, motivate them, and influence them to achieve great things for the church. The leader takes primary responsibility for whatever the church is doing. It rests on my shoulders. I spent much time and energy reading books and going to conferences to learn the right technique, get the right answer, or get motivated to be the leader the church needs.

The research, reading, and writing I did for this course of study helped me to have a different understanding of leadership. Missional leadership is not about a top-down approach, where the leader bears sole responsibility for cultivating mission and vision. I am not even the primary actor: God is the primary actor. God has a plan for the church. God is at work in the world. The Holy Spirit works through the collective discernment of the whole church, not just through the one who receives a paycheck. Every person is on a

level playing field when it comes to discerning God's will. The emphasis is on relationships rather than utility.

The single most important insight for me in this program is the paradigm of technical and adaptive change. Before, I would have attempted to develop a five-year goal, or a ten year prescribed process, to attempt to grow the church. I now have a different concept around processing change: taking the appropriate time to evaluate the challenge, and utilizing the collective wisdom of the congregation to think through strategies for addressing the challenge, then undergoing an iterative process of action and reflection before moving ahead in the process.

The most challenging aspect of my new understanding of leadership is that it defies the expectations of most people. They expect me to know the answer and to simply tell them how to fix whatever is the problem. When I fail to simply tell them what to do, they get frustrated, thinking that I am making them play a guessing game. There is something both freeing and challenging in admitting that I do not know the right answer, but that we are going to all discover it together. This is one of the things that makes the action research model so interesting and powerful.

This program has also given me the opportunity to dive deeper into my understanding of who God is, and what that means for ministry in the church. My understanding of Trinity has grown and expanded, which has also expanded my imagination for the way that God is at work in the world. Rublev's *Trinity* icon is the image that comes to mind when I think of this expanded image of God, and that image has had an impact on several congregation members as well. The three persons of God

have a place at the table for me, a fourth participant in the story that God is writing of this world. What a beautiful thought!

Final Thoughts

I had the opportunity several years ago to have a conversation with George Hunsberger about future scholarship in missional theology. I asked him who I should be reading; who was on the cutting edge of the missional church? Hunsberger told me that the cutting edge was happening at the local church level, in congregations where missional theology was being lived out. He said that my fellow pastors and I would write the next chapter. I am honored to have had the opportunity to devote this chapter of my life to studying the missional church, and writing a chapter in the continuing saga of *missio Dei* in this world. I hope this story continues to be lived out in the lives of churches everywhere, until the day when Christ returns. Soli Deo Gloria!

APPENDIX A

BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Baseline Congregational Questionnaire	
Introduction	
<p>Dear Member,</p> <p>You are invited to participate in a study of church members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding their Christian faith. I hope to learn about the social, cultural, and religious factors that have an effect on faith in God and participation in the church. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an active member of Church.</p> <p>If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to establish a baseline for measuring change in our congregation's beliefs and behaviors. Another survey will follow in a few months to measure any change. This survey will take about 20 minutes to complete. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to inform my research of our congregation. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.</p> <p>Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.</p> <p>Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Church or with me. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.</p> <p>If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, contact me:</p> <p>Rev. Chris Jacobsen Lead Pastor</p> <p>You may also contact my advisors with any questions or concerns:</p> <p>Dr. Daniel Anderson</p> <p>Dr. Alvin Luedke</p> <p>Thank you for your time.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Chris Jacobsen</p> <p>* 1. To begin the survey, please provide your date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY) and the first letter of your last name:</p> <p>Date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY) <input type="text"/></p> <p>First letter of last name <input type="text"/></p>	

Baseline Congregational Questionnaire

2. How optimistic are you about the future of this church?

Not at all Optimistic	Somewhat Optimistic	Very Optimistic	Extremely Optimistic
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. In the past 6 months, how frequently have you attended worship services at this church?

Less than once a month	Once a month	Two or three times a month	Once a week
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. How many days last month did you visit the church property? (enter a number)

5. Other than for worship services, for what purpose did you visit the church property in the last month?

- ☐ Bible study
- ☐ Choir rehearsal
- ☐ Committee meeting (including Consistory)
- ☐ Social Gathering
- ☐ Other (please specify)

6. How important is the Christian faith in your life?

Not at all important	Somewhat Important	Very important	Extremely Important
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How actively involved would you say you are in the church and in church activities?

Not at all	Not much	Somewhat	A great deal
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Do you presently hold a leadership position or role in the church?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. Do you presently volunteer your time in organizations other than the church?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

10. If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, how do you volunteer in other organizations?

11. If time were not an issue, what are ways you would like to volunteer in or beyond the church?

12. How much of your income, if any, do you give to the church?

1-5%

6-10%

11-15%

More than 15%

Prefer not to answer

☐☐☐☐☐

13. By your definition, do you tithe?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Baseline Congregational Questionnaire

14. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

15. What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65 & above
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

16. What is your employment status?

- ☐ Full-time
- ☐ Part-time
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Not employed
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

17. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

18. What is your marital status?

- ☐ Single/Never Married
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

19. What is your annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$40,000
- ☐ \$40,000 to \$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000 to \$79,999
- ☐ \$80,000 to \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 and over
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

END LINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

First letter of last name

End Line Congregational Questionnaire

2. Which of the following congregational gatherings did you attend?

- ☐ Advent Intergenerational Gathering (December 2016)
- ☐ Exploring the Past and Present -- Core Values and Wishes (January 2017)
- ☐ Exploring the Future -- What Is God Doing and What Does God Want to Do? (February 2017)
- ☐ Healing Service (March 2017)
- ☐ Worship at Eastern Christian Children's Retreat (April 2017)
- ☐ None of the Above

3. How optimistic are you about the future of this church?

Not at all Optimistic	Somewhat Optimistic	Very Optimistic	Extremely Optimistic
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. How has your level of optimism about the future of this church changed in the last 6 months?

I am much less optimistic about the church's future	I am slightly less optimistic about the church's future	My optimism about the future has not changed	I am slightly more optimistic about the church's future	I am much more optimistic about the church's future
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. What has contributed to any changes in your level of optimism?

6. In the past 6 months, how frequently have you attended worship services at this church?

Less than once a month	Once a month	Two or three times a month	Once a week
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How many days last month did you visit the church property? (enter a number)

8. Other than for worship services, for what purpose did you visit the church property in the last month?

- ☐ Bible study
- ☐ Choir rehearsal
- ☐ Committee meeting (including Consistory)
- ☐ Social Gathering
- ☐ Other (please specify)

End Line Congregational Questionnaire

9. How important is the Christian faith in your life?

Not at all important

Somewhat important

Very important

Extremely important

☐
☐
☐
☐

10. How actively involved would you say you are in the church and in church activities?

Not at all

Not much

Somewhat

A great deal

☐
☐
☐
☐

11. Do you presently hold a leadership position or role in the church?

☐ Yes

☐ No

12. What are your reasons for serving in this leadership role?

13. Do you presently volunteer your time in organizations other than the church?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. If you answered 'yes' to the previous question, how do you volunteer in other organizations?

15. If time were not an issue, what are ways you would like to volunteer in or beyond the church?

16. How much of your income, if any, do you give to the church?

1-5%

6-10%

11-15%

More than 15%

Prefer not to answer

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

17. By your definition, do you tithe?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

End Line Congregational Questionnaire

18. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Prefer not to answer

19. What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24
☐ 25-34
☐ 35-44
☐ 45-54
☐ 55-64
☐ 65 & above
☐ Prefer not to answer

20. What is your employment status?

- ☐ Full-time
☐ Part-time
☐ Self-employed
☐ Not employed
☐ Retired
☐ Prefer not to answer

21. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

22. What is your marital status?

- ☐ Single/Never Married
☐ Married
☐ Separated
☐ Divorced
☐ Widowed
☐ Prefer not to answer

23. What is your annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$40,000
- ☐ \$40,000 to \$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000 to \$79,999
- ☐ \$80,000 to \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 and over
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

24. If you would be willing to be interviewed about your responses to this survey, please enter your name and telephone number/email address (optional):

Name

Contact Information

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Becoming the Church by Practicing Being the Church: Cultivating Participation in God's Mission

You are invited to be in a research study of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding Christian faith and life. You were selected as a possible participant because you participated in a recent congregational conversation event. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by me as part of my master's thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to measure the effect of congregational events on our congregation's participation in ministry, both within and outside the church.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you participate in a focus group discussion about your experience of the congregational event, and the impact that event has had on your faith. The discussion will last no longer than 90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no special risks involved by being a part of this study, aside from normal life risks.

There are no direct benefits of participating in this research.

Indirect benefits to yourself/or the general public of participation are improved understanding of the mission and vision of Abundant Life Reformed Church, contribution to future programs or policies, and strengthening of the church's life and faith.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file in my study at ALRC; only my advisors Daniel Anderson and Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

The focus group discussions will be digitally recorded, and the files will be stored on my computer. Only I will have access to this raw data.

Indicate one of the following:

a. Raw data will be destroyed by November 1, 2021 (Federal guidelines specify a minimum of 3 years for retention of data)

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/ or with XXXXX Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Chris Jacobsen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at XXX, or by email at XXX
Phone: XXX.

Advisors:

Dr. Daniel Anderson

Dr. Alvin Luedke

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

(If audiotaping or videotaping is used, add:)

I consent to be audiotaped (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Groups Following Each Intervention:

- How did this event help to inform your understanding of:
 - God
 - The church
 - Your life
 - Your faith
 - The world
- Why did you decide to attend the event?
- Based on your experience, how likely would you be to attend again?
- What other things did you say “no” to in order to attend the event?
- How have your beliefs and attitudes changed as a result of participating in the event?
- How likely are you to attend another event like this?

APPENDIX E

LIST OF *IN VIVO* CODES

- accomodating needs
- acknowledging diversity of beliefs
- active ministry of elder is meaningful work
- adding a service for others in need
- Age plays a role in involvement
- am I a circle or a horseshoe
- amazement at numbers of participants
- an hour on Sunday morning is sufficient
- apathy
- appreciation for the work of others
- approachability
- awesome responsibility
- being used by the Holy Spirit
- broaden the definition of healing
- can't explain it
- can't have someone without the other
- can't separate them
- caring for aging parents
- chores at home
- church doesn't focus on 3 in 1
- church is broader
- church is one hour per week
- comfort level of the congregation
- comforting
- comparing ourselves to others
- compartmentalization
- concern about messing up
- concern for others
- congregation comments on the prayer
- congregation diverse in its history
- congregation is very caring
- congregation not involved in merger conversations
- congregation would be uncomfortable
- connected through prayer and thanks
- connectivity of elder ministry
- considering facility changes
- considering the unknown
- Consistory
- Conversation
- create a space for sharing in public afterwards
- creating a different service for those with special needs
- culture
- day of obligation
- deep family ties
- different meanings of healing
- different missions
- digestive process
- disappointment in myself
- discovering new things builds me up more

- dissatisfied at the way things are going
- doing something for God
- elders know the concerns of others
- elders leadership
- enriching and rewarding experience of merger
- equality before God
- experience as part of worship
- facility larger than we need
- faith incomplete without the Trinity
- Faith Sharing
- family time
- fear of commitment
- fear of large groups
- fear of looking dumb
- feeling in home visits
- feeling of having a profound impact as an elder
- feeling of letting others down
- feeling overwhelmed
- feelings about 3 persons
- feelings of heaviness
- feels more natural if personalized
- Fellowship
 - Being together
 - cooking
 - Food
- Fun entertainment
- gathering is good for us
- the benefit of getting to know others
- felt scripted
- finding value beyond the immediate moment
- focused
- follow-up
- from that church to this church
- functions
- get people together for things other than Bible study
- getting a better understanding of one another
- getting to know each other better
- giving it a try
- got more out of it later
- greater connectivity in healing service
- grocery shopping
- hanging out with friends
- happy and joyful
- healing and communion both sacramental
- healing as communion with God
- healing service good for the congregation
- heart broken by need
- heaviness not expressed
- here because of the other people that are there
- holiness and reverence

- holy
- holy spirit gets forgotten
- how I actually think
- how will we grow the church
- humbling
- I didn't think about it before
- importance of being yourself
- importance of novelty vs. routine
- in the Lord's hands
- inadequacy
- indifference
- individual meaning
- inspiration
- Interest in future direction of the church
- interest in knowing the congregation's thoughts
- Involvement
- Jesus talked about more
- lack of comfort
- lack of response in prayer
- later reflection
- Learning
- learning about other people
- learning from history
- learning from other churches
- like taking communion
- looking for a church home
- mainstreaming
- make it relevant and fresh
- many other things being told
- married in this church
- meaningful
- merger
- more conversation needed
- necessary for all, givers and recipients
- need for a new vision
- need to get over being uncomfortable
- need to grow the church, but how
- no observed difference in connectedness
- not pushy, but present
- not realizing the impact
- on the same page in terms of concerns for the future
- one person
- one super person
- open-ended table
- openness
- our lives as positive examples
- Past Experience
- people moved by the holy spirit
- people who actively participated feel more connected
- personal life

- physical limitations
- plant the seed of curiosity
- power in the act of anointing
- powerful
- PR
- prayer held dear
- praying for others
- praying God help me
- preparation
- privacy, between me and god
- questioning myself
- questions about motives of others
- reasons for not participating
- reflected out in the world
- regret about few people
- Reinforcing what I already believe
- relationship
- Reminded or Review
- responsibility
- responsibility for taking good notes
- resting
- risk of alienating congregation
- risk of doing more harm than good
- sacramental
- sense of compassion
- sensitivity to the needs of children
- sensitivity to the needs of others
- Separate
- sharing the value of the experience
- similar core values and similar vision
- social media
- someone else's conscience
- Something to take home to help remember
- sometimes mundane aspect of being an elder
- speaking up for others
- spiritual progress
- spiritual significance of elders ministry
- strength in numbers
- strengthens faith
- suppressed
- surprised by comments about music
- taken by surprise at needs
- talking about it
- the importance of knowing those in need personally
- thinking more
- those who need it the most are not present
- Thoughts about God
 - 3 work together
 - all 3 functioning at the same time
 - God changes hearts

- God in 3 persons
- God is one
- God is one powerful thing
- God is so smart
- God is with me
- God is with others too
- God listens to everyone's prayers
- God not just for you
- God working in people's lives
- God, spirit, son
- Roublev Trinity
- same person
- similar representations of the Trinity
- stronger connection to God
- Trinity as multi-tasking
- Trinity Icon
- Trinity open
- trinity with you all the time
- Trinity working for us
- wrestling with the Trinity
- Thoughts about other people
 - others are apathetic
 - others are lazy
 - others don't know how much fun it is
 - others know more than I do
 - others' thoughts confirm my own
 - reluctance takes the form of indifference
 - reluctance to share concerns with others
 - surprise at number of people participating
- Thoughts About the church
 - true understanding comes in a smaller thing (group)
 - uncomfortable
 - understanding where others are coming from
 - union's last supper reenactment memorable
 - unknown things about congregation members
 - use of technology to tell the story
 - want to figure out a way to reach out
 - want to help save people
 - we are all very similar
 - we don't know what to do
 - we need people to see what we've learned
 - we need to be a responsive people
 - we work together
 - we're the ones that have to stop Satan
 - we're viewed as odd
 - weighing competing interests
 - what could be done together vs. what was done separately
 - what I need
 - what those who don't attend don't understand
 - where traditions come from
 - willingness to share
 - without reminders, it goes by the wayside
 - world is in bad shape
 - you get out what you put in

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